HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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5 March 2018
The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Cyber-attack Protection

1. Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of his Department’s policies on protecting the UK from cyber-attack.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): We take the cyber-threat very seriously. We are strengthening our defences against increasingly sophisticated attacks. Our approach to cyber-defence includes a wide range of technical, operational and administrative measures, as well as close co-operation with the National Cyber Security Centre. Indeed, this week we are opening a dedicated state-of-the-art cyber-defence school at the Defence Academy in Shrivenham to enhance the cyber-skills of our defence personnel.

Jim Shannon: With the National Cyber Security Centre recording 34 C2 attacks and 762 slightly less serious C3 attacks, will the Secretary of State outline the steps his Department is taking to shore up our defences as best as humanly possible against an attack that some watchdogs have described as “imminent” in the light of rising Russian aggression?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight this increasing threat, which is why we have set out plans to spend £1.9 billion over a five-year period on making sure that our cyber-defence is right and that we develop the capabilities not just to defend against attacks but to be able to operationalise this ourselves.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Britain’s forces are a major part of the enhanced forward presence in the Baltic states. At a recent meeting of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, we heard of some of the malign attacks on those forces, particularly on the German deployment in Lithuania. I am not asking my right hon. Friend to give me any great detail, because that is necessarily secret, but can he assure the House that we are learning from every attack and that we are training people, down to quite a low level, to make sure that our forces are best equipped to deal with this?

Gavin Williamson: That is a very important point, because it is not just about the work that we do centrally; it is about training our forces to best understand the threats to which they will potentially be exposed as they operate in sometimes increasingly hostile fields. We have done that for all troops engaged in NATO operations, and more globally.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Local authorities can be vulnerable to cyber-attacks. One in four councils, including East Dunbartonshire, have experienced cyber-security incidents, yet many do not even provide mandatory training in cyber-security. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and indeed with the devolved Administrations, to make sure our local authorities do not become a soft target for cyber-attack?
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Young men and women traditionally joined Her Majesty’s armed forces, in large part, because of the physical challenge and the desire for combat experience. Should we not increasingly be recruiting young men and women because of their digital and IT proficiency, so that we can develop an elite cadre of cyber-specialists?

Gavin Williamson: As we face new challenges, we have to be realistic that we need a whole different range of skills—not just the traditional skills that have been the backbone of our armed forces, but new skills—and we are looking at how we can best recruit those skills into our armed forces, and not just into the regulars but also into the reserves to boot.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Surely the Secretary of State knows that what Mr Putin announced a few days ago is basically a new cold war, and it is not just cyber-warfare but every kind of warfare. At a time when Europe seems to be fragmenting, our commitment to NATO is deeply hurt by Donald Trump moving into a new phase of withdrawal. What are we going to do about all this?

Gavin Williamson: Putin has made it quite clear that he has hostile intent towards this country, and we have been seeing the build-up of his forces across the eastern front. Given what they have been doing over many years, we have to wake up to that threat and respond to it. Not just through nuclear weapons—although our continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent is absolutely integral to maintaining the peace—but through conventional armed forces, we have to match what Putin is doing with his Russian forces. We have to be aware of the challenges we face, which is very much why we are engaging in the modernising defence programme to ensure that we can match the Russians.

Defence Co-operation

2. Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his counterpart in the US Administration on strengthening defence co-operation. [904152]

7. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his counterpart in the US Administration on strengthening defence co-operation; and if he will make a statement. [904157]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): The US and UK enjoy a strategic global partnership, which was forged through shared values and the belief in freedom and the rule of law and order, and reinforced by mutual history, partnership and military co-operation. UK-US defence co-operation is today the broadest, deepest and most advanced of any two countries. Our collaboration extends across the full spectrum of defence, including operations and flagship capability programmes. Our troops have fought alongside each other for more than 100 years, and 2018 will be another busy year.

Ross Thomson: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Currently, the UK’s defence trade partnership with the US is worth more than $3 billion and includes collaboration on projects such as the F-35 programme, as well as a common compartment for UK-US ballistic missile submarines. Does he agree that with the UK regaining its ability to strike free trade deals across the globe post Brexit, we have the opportunity to deepen the bonds of our special relationship with the US when it comes to our national defence interests?

Gavin Williamson: We are already one of the world-leading countries in defence exports, and we have to seize the opportunity that exiting the European Union provides to expand our ability to export right around the world, making sure it is absolutely clear that Britain is a world leader in technology and science. So much of what we have historically done with the US we can do more and more right around the globe.

Michael Fabricant: May I implore my right hon. Friend not to listen to the Trump-bashing from Opposition Members? There is absolutely no indication that President Trump is attenuating his commitment to NATO. Furthermore, NATO, not the European Union, is the backbone of this nation’s defence, and my right hon. Friend should be—I know that he is—going out there to Washington and speaking to his counterparts. Will he talk about precisely what he has achieved? [Interruption.] Sorry about that.

Gavin Williamson: I thought my hon. Friend was incredibly eloquent.

Let us be clear that there is one reason why we have had peace right across the continent of Europe since the second world war: NATO, and the fact that it has acted as a deterrent to those who wish to prosecute aggressive campaigns against the west. I am very proud of the work that has been done, and will be done in the future, with our allies.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State tell me what the pound-dollar rate was at the time of the commissioning of the F-35 programme, what it is now and how much extra taxpayers’ money is being paid as a result?

Gavin Williamson: I am afraid I not have details of the exchange rates with me, but I will write to the right hon. Gentleman with them. I can tell him that exchange rate changes over the past few years have cost us about a quarter of a billion pounds extra for the defence budget, as a result of the movement of the pound.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The US nuclear posture review was met with an equal level of posturing by President Putin during his state of the nation speech last Thursday. What is the British Government’s policy response to these worrying developments, as the world slides needlessly into a second cold war? Does the Secretary of State believe the British Government have a role to play in trying to de-escalate the situation?
Gavin Williamson: Let us be really clear: President Putin has been developing a much more hostile and aggressive posture towards the UK, the US and our allies for an awful lot longer than the past 12 months. Russia wants to assert its rights. We have seen increased Russian activity in the north Atlantic—a tenfold increase over the past few years. Do we sit submissively by and just accept that President Putin can do whatever he wishes to do? Or do we have to look at how we respond, making it clear that we are willing to stand up to bullying and the fact that nations are being subjected to attacks by Russia? We need to deal with that, and that is what we will do. That is why I am proud that we have the continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend inform the House about what discussions he has had with his US counterpart, so that we can work together to ensure that our other NATO allies pay the 2% of GDP that they should be paying towards our collective defence?

Gavin Williamson: In this country, I am very proud that we are able to say that we spend 2% of GDP on defence. But we cannot outsource Europe’s defence to the United States: every European country has to play its part in defending Europe. That means spending the money required to defend the borders of western Europe.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I begin by paying tribute to the members of the armed forces who helped their country get moving, inasmuch as it could, over the past week.

How confident can the Secretary of State, his US counterpart or indeed any NATO counterpart be that we can bring to the table what we say we can bring, given that there is a £20 billion funding gap in his Department’s equipment plan?

Gavin Williamson: We are looking at exactly what resources and everything else we need going forward. We carry considerable contingencies in our equipment plan, and we are very confident that we will be able to deliver everything we need for our armed forces.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am afraid that that is a bit of a “head still in the sand” answer. The National Audit Office said that projects will have to be delayed, scaled back or cancelled. Will the Secretary of State ensure that no project in Scotland will be delayed, scaled back or cancelled?

Gavin Williamson: We are looking at exactly what resources and everything else we need going forward. We carry considerable contingencies in our equipment plan, and we are very confident that we will be able to deliver everything we need for our armed forces.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am afraid that that is a bit of a “head still in the sand” answer. The National Audit Office said that projects will have to be delayed, scaled back or cancelled. Will the Secretary of State ensure that no project in Scotland will be delayed, scaled back or cancelled?

Gavin Williamson: I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware that we are doing the modernising defence programme. He will also be pleased to hear that we will open up our public consultation as part of that programme. We are going to be looking at all we do—how best we can use our armed forces to deliver for the whole United Kingdom, and how to make sure that we are best protected against the threats from abroad. I look forward to the hon. Gentleman’s contribution to that.

Royal Navy: Fleet Size


The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): The Royal Navy is growing for the first time in a generation, with the Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers and new submarines, frigates, patrol vessels and aircraft. The Royal Navy continues to meet the demands we place on it and maintains its operational edge.

Luke Pollard: With the sale of HMS Ocean, Devonport and the nation have lost a third of our Royal Navy amphibious assault ships. In more and more uncertain times, can the Minister reassure people in Plymouth that Devonport will not see any more cuts to frigates, amphibious assault ships and survey ships such as HMS Scott in the upcoming review?

Mark Lancaster: I certainly take this opportunity to underline our thanks to the people of Plymouth for their age-old commitment to and support for the Royal Navy. I absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that Devonport will continue to be one of the cornerstone bases of the Royal Navy in future. As he will be aware, we only recently allocated the location of the Type 23 frigates. We are doing more work on the location of the Type 26 frigates, and we hope to be able to announce that shortly.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I must declare an interest, Mr Speaker: my grandfather and father both served in the Royal Navy, and both would be turning in their graves at the size of the Royal Navy. Although I quite accept the financial difficulty that the Minister has, does he accept from me that the threats from around the world—not least from China, which is talked about too seldom—are growing? We are sending one ship, I think, across the waters to the south of China. I ask the Minister, please, for an assurance that the Royal Navy’s size and capability will be increased.

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend will be aware of the recent deployment of HMS Sutherland, and there will be further such deployments in future to that part of the world.

For the first time in a generation, the Royal Navy is actually growing. It grew in manpower last year and will continue to grow over the next couple of years, and not just in manpower—the size of its surface fleet is also growing. The latest of the offshore patrol vessels arrived in Portsmouth only this weekend.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Given everything that the Minister’s boss has just said about the importance of NATO, the deterrent and the threat from Russia, it would be absolutely unthinkable, would it not, not to order the full quota of seven Astute class submarines?

Mark Lancaster: The hon. Gentleman is a champion of his constituency and repeatedly comes to the House to support the work that his constituents have done for generations in building our submarines. I am very confident that shortly he will have the news that he wishes for.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): When HMS Queen Elizabeth puts to sea, it will need a fleet of frigates and destroyers to escort and protect it. Will my right hon.
Friend reassure the House that the Royal Navy has sufficient vessels to perform that vital task while protecting our shores at home?

**Mark Lancaster:** Yes, indeed. I can reassure my hon. Friend that the Royal Navy continues to meet all its operational requirements. As I said a few moments ago, the size of our fleet will increase in the years to come.

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that the National Audit Office has produced a scathing report on the Ministry of Defence’s equipment plan for 2017 to 2027. It says that there is a £20.8 billion gaping black hole in the MOD’s budget. Can the Minister tell me why the Type 31e frigate is not even referred to in the equipment plan?

**Mark Lancaster:** It is a little bit rich when the hon. Gentleman comes to the Dispatch Box to criticise this Government over supposed black holes in defence spending, given the previous Labour Government’s record in this area, but I am sure the Defence Procurement Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), will write to him to explain why that is the case.

**Defence Suppliers: Innovation**

4. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage innovation by defence suppliers.

11. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage innovation by defence suppliers.

20. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage innovation by defence suppliers.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Guto Bebb):** With an equipment plan worth £180 billion over 10 years, a rising defence budget and an £800 million innovation fund, there are great opportunities for innovative suppliers to work with the Ministry of Defence. The Department recently took part in a Pitch@Palace event, reaching out to defence sector entrepreneurs, and the open call for innovation has been changed to increase opportunities to work with the Government.

**Maggie Throup:** Baltex, which is based in my constituency, is a leading supplier of high-performance fabrics, meshes and nets that are designed to keep our service personnel safe and well-protected in the field. What is my hon. Friend doing to support businesses in the defence supply chain that manufacture technical textiles, and will he and the Secretary of State consider visiting Baltex to see the innovative work that is being carried out in Erewash in support of our armed forces?

**Guto Bebb:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Indeed, I would like to take her up on her kind offer of a visit to Baltex, which is an important provider of services to the Ministry of Defence. It is a classic example of a company that is generating key supplies for the Ministry of Defence and for our armed services, and it is being innovative in the way that it does that. Indeed, we see that innovation across the board with Ministry of Defence contractors—they are innovative for the UK economy in addition to supplying our armed forces.

**Luke Hall:** Does the Minister agree that the launch of the RAF’s first satellite, Carbonite-2, using British technology, is to be welcomed, and can he update the House on whether space technology will be part of the combat air strategy?

**Guto Bebb:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I am very disappointed not to have been able to visit Surrey Satellite Technology, which developed that facility. Unfortunately, my visit did not take place last Thursday owing to the weather.

This is a significant development. From my perspective, it is an example of innovative thinking being developed by the MOD and the Air Force. Even more importantly, it was a concept only 10 months ago and it has now been procured. Obviously, as part of our combat air strategy, the way in which we interlink with satellite technology will be a key consideration for the Ministry of Defence.

**Vicky Ford:** The Minister’s predecessor recently paid a very welcome visit to BAE in Chelmsford, which has played a critical role in developing Britain’s radar capacity through the generations. Does the Minister agree that, when it comes to the next generation of ballistic missile defence radar, it is vital to maintain British capacity and make sure that these skills stay in Britain?

**Guto Bebb:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question and pay tribute to BAE for the work that is being done in her constituency. She is absolutely right to highlight the importance of keeping skills in the United Kingdom. Members from all parts of the House should be proud that the Ministry of Defence is responsible for more than 20,000 apprenticeship opportunities throughout the United Kingdom, as it highlights again that Ministry of Defence procurement leads to high-quality, skilled jobs in all parts of the UK, including Chelmsford.

**Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): What impact does the Minister see coming from his attempts to increase innovation in defence suppliers if the UK withdraws from REACH, the European regulation on the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals, and if the free movement of scientists and engineers is not part of the Brexit agreement? Certainly, defence companies have expressed grave concerns to me about that.

**Guto Bebb:** This Government want to continue the free movement of people with relevant skills. The MOD is already engaging with the REACH issue. As it happens, I will be meeting relevant companies tomorrow to discuss the matter. I fully understand the hon. Lady’s concerns, but the MOD is on top of the issue and is looking at it closely. I am confident that we will have an agreement that will benefit both the United Kingdom and our European Union partners.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): BCB International is a fantastic and innovative defence company, also supplying the civilian and humanitarian sectors, based in my constituency and in...
that of my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith). Indeed, I have eaten ration packs cooked on its fantastic FireDragon fuel. The company needs support from all Departments to be able to export effectively. Will the Minister commit to speaking with his colleagues at the Department for Transport, and perhaps to meeting me, to ensure that it gets support from the whole Government to be able to export to other markets, including the United States?

**Guto Bebb:** I would be more than delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the issue in more detail. I was very pleased to visit the company in question in my previous position as a Wales Office Minister, and it is difficult not to be impressed by what it provides for our armed services. I am more than happy to take any opportunity to support the company and Welsh businesses.

**Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP):** The portfolio management agreement that the Ministry of Defence struck with MBDA offers the framework through which we can achieve innovation with defence suppliers. Is the Minister considering agreeing more portfolio agreements, and does he envisage that that will be any time soon?

**Guto Bebb:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. One of the first meetings that I had in my new position was with MBDA. Indeed, I also met its chief executive in Paris recently. The agreement is an example of what can be done to embed innovation in the way in which we do procurement. It shows support for UK-based companies and a degree of partnership between the MOD and the companies in question.

**Robert Courts (Witney) (Con):** May I also welcome the combat air strategy? Will the Minister please give a commitment that the review will look not only to ensure that the RAF has the aircraft that it needs to fight the conflicts of the future, but at how British industry will deliver them?

**Guto Bebb:** My hon. Friend is a great champion for the RAF and for his constituency. I believe that he called for the combat air strategy before the announcement was made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. This is indeed about capability, but it is also about embedding the ability of UK industry to respond to the needs of the 21st century, and the combat air strategy will do just that.

**Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab):** There is crippling uncertainty about the customs arrangements that our defence suppliers will face after Brexit. This is threatening their ability to innovate and invest. Just today, Airbus, the RAF’s biggest supplier of large aircraft, has warned that trade barriers will seriously impede its ability to move parts across borders. It is clear that only a comprehensive customs union with the EU can guarantee frictionless trade, so will the Minister explain why the Government have ruled out this option?

**Guto Bebb:** The Government have been very clear that we want the most comprehensive free trade agreements possible with the European Union. A free trade agreement of that nature will respond to the concerns of industry, especially the industry supplying the defence sector.

**Nia Griffith:** The fact of the matter is that ADS, the trade body, has said that the Government’s preferred options are either incomplete or so complex that they simply will not be viable. Why will this Government not listen to the voices of industry such as ADS and the CBI? Why are they ignoring those voices and their support for a customs union? Is it not the case that the Government are putting ideology above the interests of defence suppliers and pursuing an extreme Brexit that will damage jobs, our sovereign capability and, ultimately, our national security?

**Guto Bebb:** I find it interesting that only a few weeks ago the hon. Lady was voting against a proposition from her own Back Benchers for the United Kingdom to stay within the customs union. It is also the case that the announcement made by the Leader of the Opposition was about staying within a customs union, not the customs union; in terms of listening to the voice of industry, there is not much in common between what was said by the Leader of the Opposition and the CBI.

### Strategic Threats

**Q5. Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of the preparedness of the armed forces to adapt to new and changing strategic threats.  

**The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):** Our armed forces are among the very best in the world. Through the modernising defence programme, we will assess the ever-changing threats that this country faces and understand what we can do to make them ever more effective at keeping us safe today and into the future.

**Tony Lloyd:** The Defence Secretary will recognise, given his earlier answers, that the threats that we face—both conventional and from new forms of technology—are massive and varied, and come not simply from Russia, but from many different sources. In that context, he talks about a fiscally non-neutral defence review. Will he tell us whether the Chancellor has agreed to sign up to that process?

**Gavin Williamson:** When the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and I met and agreed the terms of reference for the modernising defence review, it was clear that it was not to be fiscally neutral. We were to understand what the threats were and understand what we can implement what is needed to ensure the defence of the realm?

**Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what progress has been made on the modernising defence review, so that we can implement what is needed to ensure the defence of the realm?

**Gavin Williamson:** I assure my hon. Friend that we are making good progress. As I said earlier, we are opening this up to public consultation. We are very eager to report back to the House as quickly as possible, and we hope that that can be done by June or July, before the NATO summit.
**Defence Co-operation**

6. Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his European and US counterparts on maintaining defence co-operation between the EU and NATO.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):

I was trying to offload various questions on to my ministerial colleagues, Mr Speaker. Sadly, they were not willing to take them. /Interruption/ J God loves a trier.

I have regular conversations with my European and US counterparts on maintaining defence co-operation between the European Union and NATO. EU-NATO co-operation is key to combating the breadth of challenges we face, and the institutions must work together in a way that is complementary and prevents duplication.

The UK will continue to support better working between the EU and NATO while we remain in the EU and after we leave.

Julia Lopez: I thank the Secretary of State for taking my question. Following the recent signing of the permanent structured co-operation pact between 25 EU nations, what role does he envisage for the UK after Brexit in ensuring that the EU’s future defence co-operation plans enhance NATO rather than detract from it?

Gavin Williamson: There have always been traditional tensions within the European Union as to which way it would like to take its role in defence. We want to work with our European Union partners. We must not forget, however, that 80% of NATO’s defence is provided by countries outside the European Union. We should not see leaving the European Union as a step towards making the continent of Europe less safe. Indeed, it is fair to say that in the decades before the European Union was invented, NATO was already keeping the continent safe, incredibly successfully. We want to have the opportunity to work closely with our European Union partners, but equally we want to make sure that that does not detract from the amazing work that NATO does.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The European Defence Agency does not envisage third-party countries joining, so is that one of the agencies that the Government will be seeking an administrative arrangement with?

Gavin Williamson: We are very happy to discuss how best we can work with our European partners, but we do not want to do anything that diminishes what we agreed to on 23 June 2016, which is exiting the European Union. If we can work in a pragmatic way with European partners, that is good, but let us not forget that most of what we do in, say, equipment programmes is done through bilateral relationships, not through the European Union.

**Armed Forces Covenant**

8. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage more organisations to participate in the armed forces covenant.

Tom Pursglove: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. What conversations has he had with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about ensuring that there is better understanding in local government of their duties and obligations and what they need to be doing under the covenant?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend raises an important point. It is important that each Department understands its commitments. That is why I stressed the importance of the veterans board, on which the Secretaries of State for all of the Departments are represented. We now have proper assessment techniques to make sure that Departments’ commitments—in that case, to do with housing—are met.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Members across the House and people across the country were horrified to read last week that the Ministry of Defence had taken money raised from the LIBOR funds that was supposed to benefit forces charities and support the delivery of the armed forces covenant, and instead spent it on projects—although worthy ones—that should be part of routine departmental spending. Can the Minister tell the House how that was allowed to happen? More importantly, will the Ministry consider itself a charity? Can the Minister tell the House how that was allowed to happen? More importantly, will the Ministry consider itself a charity? Can the Minister tell the House how that was allowed to happen? More importantly, will the Ministry consider itself a charity? Can the Minister tell the House how that was allowed to happen? More importantly, will the Ministry consider itself a charity? Can the Minister tell the House how that was allowed to happen? More importantly, will the Ministry consider itself a charity? Can the Minister tell the House how that was allowed to happen? More importantly, will the Ministry consider itself a charity? Can the Minister tell the House how that was allowed to happen? More importantly, will the Ministry consider itself a charity? Can the Minister tell the House how that was allowed to happen? More importantly, will the Ministry consider itself a charity? Can the Minister tell the House how that was allowed to happen? More importantly, will the Ministry consider itself a charity? Can the Minister tell the House how that was allowed to happen? More importantly, will the Ministry consider itself a charity? Can the Minister tell the House how that was allowed to happen? More importantly, will the Ministry consider itself a charity? Can the Minister tell the House how that was allowed to happen? More importantly, will the Ministry consider itself a charity? Can the Minister tell the House how that was allowed to happen? More importantly, will the Ministry consider itself a charity?

Mr Ellwood: I also saw those comments in the press. It is important to understand that LIBOR grants are there for additional facilities. The MOD has a responsibility to provide core activities. Obviously, there is a grey area between a core activity and an additional facility. I am more than happy to look at the details of what the hon. Gentleman raises, and I will write to him.

**Conditions of Service**

9. Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): What plans he has to introduce greater flexibility in the conditions of service for the armed forces.
17. **Kirstene Hair** (Angus) (Con): What plans he has to introduce greater flexibility in the conditions of service for the armed forces.

**Mr Ellwood:** I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s question. It is important to recognise that we need to reflect the needs and aspirations of civilian society. Flexible capability has already been introduced, and the process is ongoing. The Bill has received Royal Assent, as I mentioned, and will come into force in April 2019.

**Mr Ellwood:** I am not sure there is much more to add than “ill-thought-out mess”.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): On the conditions of service, it is also right that servicemen and women who become unfit for duty should have a system that supports them that is fit for purpose. We know that currently, it is not. The Minister said that his Department would publish a response to the February 2017 review of the armed forces compensation scheme a year after publication. Where is it?

**Mr Ellwood:** I will certainly write to the hon. Lady with the details of that. She is absolutely right; we want to see people recuperate, recover and get back on to the frontline. One of the big changes last year was our mental health and wellbeing strategy, which does exactly that—it removes the stigma that sometimes is attached to people coming forward, to make it clear when there is an issue that needs to be dealt with, so that they can get back on to the frontline. I will write to her.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): Many constituents who have given outstanding service to our country have come to me with mental health problems. How can we ensure that the conditions of service also include post-service follow-up, to give these people the care they need?

**Mr Ellwood:** That leads on nicely from the answer that I just gave. The mental health strategy was brought in. This was not working well before, and people were reluctant to come forward. We now have 11 major departments across Britain established in the main hubs of where our armed forces are based that are designed to assist people in stepping forward and dealing with mental health issues. We should also recognise that the armed forces 24/7 military mental health helpline, which allows direct access to support 24/7, was launched last week.

**NATO Modernisation**

10. **Mr Marcus Fysh** (Yeovil) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on NATO modernisation.

**Gavin Williamson:** Yes, I can.

**Pay and Retention**

12. **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the delayed pay increase on retention in the armed forces.

**Mr Cunningham:** Is the Minister actually saying that any award, once announced, will be backdated to forward to receiving its next set of recommendations later in the spring. We have made clear to all personnel that any award, once announced, will be backdated to 1 April 2018.

**Mr Cunningham:** Is the Minister actually saying that the pay increase for the armed forces has been delayed, and if so, when does he intend to implement it?

**Mr Ellwood:** As I say, we are waiting for the report to come through. It is unfortunate that we have had to introduce this pay restraint, but we should not lose sight of why pay restraint was introduced in the first place. It was because the previous Government were living beyond their means. *Interuption.* Only with the return to a strong economy can we responsibly increase public sector pay.

**Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): Last week, we saw how our armed forces stepped up to help with the chaos caused by the very challenging weather.
conditions. Does the Minister not agree that these brave men and women therefore deserve more than a 1% pay rise—it is, in fact, a real-terms pay cut—and will he make that clear to the pay review body?

Mr Ellwood: It actually works the other way around, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman in that I would like to see an increase of more than 1%. However, I go back to the rather delicate point, which was received with a bit of hostility by Opposition Members, that we cannot lose sight of the fact that they must have a sense of responsibility in making sure we have a strong economy, so that we can increase public sector pay across the board.

If I may, I will just underline the wider point I made last week that without strong defence in this fast-changing and, indeed, dangerous world, a strong economy cannot in fact be guaranteed. That is why I said that 2% of GDP on defence is not enough. Thanks to the efforts of this Defence Secretary, we now have an opportunity to make the case and to put the argument through the defence modernisation programme for the more robust defence posture that will ensure we retain access to the very vital international markets that will help our economy.

NATO Operations: Estonia and Poland

13. James Cleverly (Brayntrr) (Con): What contribution the UK is making to NATO reassurance operations in Estonia and Poland.  

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): The UK has a key role in NATO’s enhanced forward presence by leading a battlegroup in Estonia and contributing to a US-led battlegroup in Poland. We have deployed about 800 personnel to Estonia and about 150 to Poland. These deployments are but part of our broader commitment to NATO and its assurance measures on the alliance’s eastern flank.

James Cleverly: I thank the Minister for that response. Does he agree with me that both our security and our economy rely on the confidence placed in us by our NATO allies that we will, in the event of an article 5 situation, be both ready and willing to support our eastern flank NATO allies?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. It is absolutely right that hard power is an important part of maintaining our defence and security. Indeed, the vice-chief of the defence staff said the same last week, and he made a strong case for spending more on defence. Our armed forces and our civilians in defence must and do work in partnership with other Departments in international development and, indeed, diplomacy.

Recruitment Partnership Project

14. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps he is taking to monitor the performance of the recruiting partnering project with Capita.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): I continue to monitor the recruiting partnering project very closely.
Mr Ellwood: There are over 400 military charities that support not just our armed forces and the veterans, but the whole veterans family—the community—and SSAFA is just one of them. It does immensely important work in providing the support that our armed forces and veterans not only deserve, but request.

Mike Wood: Mental health problems place a great strain on relationships, while family breakdown can worsen mental health issues. Will the Minister ensure that mental health support extends to service personnel families, with a particular focus on providing support to keep military families together?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is often not the person themselves who steps forward to recognise there is a mental health concern, but the partner, or the husband or wife, a family member or maybe a comrade in their unit. It is important that we provide the necessary support, which we are doing. It is a very macho environment, and unfortunately there has been a stigma attached to putting one’s hand up and saying there is issue, but we are moving forward, not just in society but in the armed forces, in challenging that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure the House will want to join me in welcoming a delegation of distinguished Canadian parliamentarians here in the House today: our very good friends from Canada—thank you—who are accompanied by, among others, the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy).

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): I am dealing with the sad case of a young man in my constituency who was injured out of the Army, but did not get the treatment he needed. Apparently he slipped through the net because of his junior rank. Will the Minister review his systems to make sure that this does not happen in future?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is very pertinent in what he says. We should have a robust system that can ensure that no person is left behind in any way. I would be more than happy to speak to him afterwards to see what more can be done to help that individual.

In the light of who our guests are, may I say thank you to the Canadians? We held a “Five Eyes” conference on mental health and veterans issues last year, where we compared notes from the “Five Eyes” community to improve all our contributions and better support for our armed forces personnel and veterans.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Sadly, some veterans return from service with mental health conditions and are faced with a shameful lack of resources to help them transition back into civilian life and find employment. I am very proud that a local Hull charity founded by Paul Matson, Hull 4 Heroes, provides them with that much needed support network and voice. Will the Minister join me in celebrating its work, and will he commit to providing our veterans with all the support for transition they desperately need?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Our transition intervention liaison service works specifically to ensure that the needs of individuals are met as they make the transition from being in the armed forces to being a veteran. I join her in paying tribute to that charity. All such charities across the country—some small, some large—do a huge amount of very important work.

Topical Questions

T1. [904176] Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I thank our armed forces for doing an incredible job to support those affected by the recent treacherous weather across the United Kingdom. From Devon to Scotland, 328 service personnel, 124 vehicles and a Chinook helicopter, which is currently operating in Cumbria, have transported staff delivering critical care and services to and from hospitals, delivered medicines to vulnerable people in the community and assisted police in evacuating members of the public stranded in vehicles. My Department and the armed forces stand ready to assist with any further calls for support.

Dr Johnson: I would like to put on record my thanks to the armed forces who came out in Lincolnshire over the past few days to support us.

The physical fitness of our servicemen and servicewomen is extremely important, yet sports facilities at RAF Cranwell, used by the military and local communities alike, are currently in a poor state of repair. I have received correspondence from constituents with particular regard to the lights for the astroturf. Will my right hon. Friend confirm when they will be repaired, and will he ask the Minister responsible for the Defence Infrastructure Organisation to come and see for himself the fitness training and other facilities at RAF Cranwell that require repair?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I gently remind colleagues that topical questions must be shorter. Forgive me. I am sure it was a very good question, but if people are going to have a script it needs to be much shorter. We have a lot to get through.

Gavin Williamson: I can absolutely promise that the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) is going to visit and take part in the assault course. Let me make it clear to Hansard that we are talking about my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East doing the assault course, not the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson).

Mr Speaker: I am sure that is very reassuring to the nation.

T2. [904177] Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): After the Secretary of State’s statement that terrorists cannot harm us and his ministry was forced to admit that its drone policy was misleading and erroneously
drafted, will the Secretary of State tell the House whether it is the policy of the UK Government to kill people outside warzones?

Gavin Williamson: Our Department and our armed forces always operate within the letter of UK and international law. Do our armed forces step up to keep our country safe from terrorist threats? Yes they do, and they will continue to do so. I am very proud of the amazing work they do to keep this country safe. I hope the right hon. Gentleman is also proud.

T6. [904181] David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend congratulate the British Army for all the work it has done, in conjunction with the Malawi Government, to protect elephants in Malawi? The ivory trade has seen a reduction in the number of elephants from 4,000 10 years ago to 2,000 now. Something must be done and thankfully the British Army is helping.

Gavin Williamson: Our armed forces play an incredibly important role in training rangers to stop the vile trade of ivory poaching. I am very pleased that we have been able to extend the scheme and continue the amazing work with Governments across Africa to ensure that majestic animals such as elephants are protected.

T3. [904178] Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Uniformed cadets, like 241 Squadron air cadets in my constituency, do an amazing job of producing well-rounded, empowered young people. I invite the Minister to look at the funding provided across government to our uniformed cadets, which clearly offer much better value for money than some other Government-funded youth programmes.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I hope that the hon. Gentleman will join me in paying tribute to the 126,000 cadets that we have in this country. Being a cadet provides a wonderful introduction to our armed forces and what they can do, giving confidence to youngsters. I will certainly look at that individual case. Charities are involved in different ways in supporting our cadets and I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman afterwards.

T7. [904182] Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I look forward to hearing the details this week of the new scheme offering £40,000-worth of bursaries to military veterans to retrain as teachers. Does the Minister agree that focusing on priority subjects is another example of how we are trying to plug the STEM skills gap?

Gavin Williamson: We have the most amazing resource in the armed forces—our people—and we want to give them the very best opportunities as they leave the armed forces. The bursary scheme offering up to £40,000 for them to train as teachers is a great opportunity. Our armed forces often have some amazing technical expertise that they will be able to bring straight to schools to benefit future generations.

T4. [904179] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Under “A Better Defence Estate,” the Secretary of State plans to close the state-of-the-art medical facilities in York and the upgraded First Division headquarters. Can he say how much this is costing the taxpayer?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady will be aware that the MOD owns 2% of the land in the United Kingdom. There is a rationalisation programme to make sure that we can provide the housing for the future, and therefore, bases are being closed. Others are being opened and being invested in as well. I am happy to look at the individual case and discuss what can be done for the future.

Mr Speaker: Succinctness personified—I call Sir Desmond Swayne.

T10. [904185] Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What personnel have been reassigned to recruitment?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): There is a contingency plan, which we are looking at very closely, where we will be moving probably about 150 personnel to act as role models on the frontline for recruiting.

T5. [904180] Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): There is a still a great deal of confusion and concern around the future basing arrangements for the Army Reserve. Could the Minister tell us when we might expect more information to be published on this important matter?

Mark Lancaster: One of the complexities of the Reserve estate is that much of it is owned not by the Ministry of Defence, but by the Reserve forces themselves. This is adding some complexity, but we hope to be able to update the House in due course.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the further set of defence commitments reached by the Prime Minister and President Macron at the summit in January represents not just the deepening of this important bilateral relationship, but a strengthening of NATO?

Gavin Williamson: The co-operation that our country has with France is second to none. The Anglo-French summit signposts an important development in that relationship—not just in terms of operations going forward, but about how best we can collaborate in terms of our defence industries.

T8. [904183] Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): How well is the latest Army recruitment campaign going?

Mark Lancaster: As I mentioned earlier, we have seen some improvement in recent weeks. The numbers are increasing and that is a positive sign.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Lockheed Martin, which is based in Havant, on having just been awarded the contract to build the new missile defence system for the Type 26 frigate?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Guto Bebb): I am very pleased to join my hon. Friend in congratulating the company. The Type 26 is a fantastic ship for the Navy, and I think the fact that, again, we see UK industry providing components for the Type 26 is
an example of the way in which the Ministry of Defence is contributing to innovation and growth in the UK economy.

Mr Speaker: I call Carol Monaghan—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] The hon. Lady just did not know how popular she was.

T9. [904184] Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I am enjoying the recognition, Mr Speaker. The National Audit Office has revealed that the cost of the Dreadnought and Astute programmes has now risen by nearly £1 billion. Can the Secretary of State confirm that there will be no further cuts to conventional forces to meet the rising costs of Trident?

Guto Bebb: I can assure the hon. Lady that our at-sea continuous nuclear defence programme is within budget, and there will be no impact on the rest of the defence budget as a result of the work that we are doing in relation to our submarine capability.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): Today’s Daily Telegraph continues to report grave concerns about the Iraq fatality investigations unit. Will the Minister agree to urgently review the case of Major Robert Campbell and offer reassurance to our service community that the bond of trust between soldiers and the Government remains intact?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. This is not about process but about people and the Government’s obligation to look after them, and a balance needs to be struck between supporting our service personnel and veterans and the right of Iraqi families to find out what happened to their loved ones. I should add that an Iraq fatality investigation cannot lead to a criminal conviction, but I will look carefully at what he has said.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Can the Minister confirm that Carillion was the largest provider of facilities and management services for the MOD and elsewhere across the world?

Mr Ellwood: Our joint ventures included agreements put forward ahead of time to make sure that if one partner was to step back, the other would continue to work, and that is exactly what has happened right across the MOD.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend pay tribute to UK peacekeepers in South Sudan and elsewhere across the world?

Gavin Williamson: I would very much like to pay tribute to the amazing peacekeeping work that our armed forces do in so many areas, South Sudan being a perfect example. It goes to show what an amazing impact our armed forces have in projecting Britain’s influence in all parts of the globe.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What assessment has the Secretary of State carried out of the preparedness of our armed forces for any expansion in the Syrian war, given the proxy conflict between Russia and America in that zone?

Gavin Williamson: Conservative Members have always recognised the importance of being fully engaged in what is happening in Syria and Iraq, and we will continue to look at that exceptionally closely. I am incredibly honoured that our armed forces are playing a vital role in degrading the Daesh terror cult, and that is what we will continue to do going forward.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What assessment have Ministers made of the contribution of defence to UK plc in protecting the trade that forms such an important part of our economy?

Guto Bebb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that issue. The MOD is one of the largest customers of UK plc and supports over 20,000 apprenticeships throughout the UK. It is clear that the MOD contributes significantly to the prosperity agenda across the UK.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The incidence of traumatic brain injury among the armed forces is much higher than it is even in the general population. How will we make sure that every single member of the armed forces who has such an injury gets the full rehabilitation they require?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We want to make sure we provide the necessary support to all those affected, although I would question whether the incidence is higher than among the general population. The new process we are putting forward, including the helpline launched last week by the Defence Secretary, will make sure that we can meet our covenant promise.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Reports suggest that of the near 100,000 who wanted to join the Army last year, only 7,500 actually made it, in part because of time delays. What can be done to streamline the recruitment process?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. We have identified as a key problem the time of flight between application and enlisting in the Army. Shortening this period and making sure we get the maximum number of people through the system is the main focus of our work at the moment.

Mr Speaker: For a short single-sentence question without commas or semicolons, I call Chi Onwurah.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Why has the mechanised infantry vehicle programme not got an acquisitions strategy—never mind that the contract has only three years to go—when it could bring mechanised vehicles back to Newcastle?

Guto Bebb: I can assure the hon. Lady that announcements will be made before the end of the financial year.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): The parents of Corporal Simon Miller are yet to receive justice for their son, one of the Red Caps murdered in Iraq in 2003. I have written to Ministers over many years on this issue. Will the Minister agree to meet me and the Millers to find some justice for their son?
Mark Lancaster: I would be delighted.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the Minister follow the Scottish Government’s lead and commit to lifting the public sector pay cap for armed forces workers?

Gavin Williamson: We are looking at how to reduce the effect of the Scottish Government’s nat tax on all our service personnel. Some 70% of service personnel serving in Scotland are seeing their pay reduced because of the Scottish Government’s actions; we need to look at how to deal with that.
The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement on our future economic partnership with the European Union.

In December, we agreed the key elements of our departure from the EU, and we are turning that agreement into draft legal text. We have made clear our concerns about the first draft that the Commission published last week, but no one should doubt our commitment to the entirety of the joint report. We are close to agreement on the terms of a time-limited implementation period to give Governments, businesses and citizens on both sides time to prepare for our new relationship, and I am confident that we can resolve our remaining differences in the days ahead. Now we must focus on our future relationship: a new relationship that respects the result of the referendum, provides an enduring solution, protects people’s jobs and security, is consistent with the kind of country that we want to be, and strengthens our union of nations and people. Those are the five tests for the deal that we will negotiate.

There are also some hard facts for both sides. First, we are leaving the single market. [Interruption.] In certain ways, our access to each other’s markets will be less than it is now. We need to strike a new balance. However, we will not accept the rights of Canada and the obligations of Norway.

Secondly, even after we have left, EU law and ECJ decisions will continue to affect us. The European Court of Justice determines whether agreements that the EU has struck are legal under the EU’s own law. If, as part of our future partnership, Parliament passes a law that is identical to an EU law, it may make sense for our courts to look at the appropriate ECJ judgments so that we both interpret those laws consistently—[Interruption]—as they do for the appropriate jurisprudence of other countries’ courts. However, the agreement that we reach must respect the sovereignty of both our legal orders. That means that the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice in the United Kingdom will end. It also means that the ultimate arbiter of disputes about our future partnership cannot be the court of either party.

Thirdly, if we want good access to each other’s markets, it has to be on fair terms. As with any trade agreement, we must accept the need for binding commitments, so we may choose to commit some areas of our regulations, such as state aid and competition, to remaining in step with the EU’s.

Finally, we must resolve the tensions between some of our objectives. We want the freedom to negotiate trade agreements around the world. We want control of our laws. We also want as frictionless a border as possible with the EU, so that we do not damage the integrated supply chains on which our industries depend, and do not have—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. A very considerable level of orchestrated heckling is taking place in the House, including heckling from some Members who will doubtless later grin at me and seek to catch my eye. They may find that there is a clash between the two. We should set a good example that will impress our dear and loyal Canadian friends, and indeed, for that matter, the British people. The House can rest assured that I will allow the maximum possible questioning and scrutiny on this occasion, as I always do, but the Prime Minister is entitled to be heard with courtesy.

The Prime Minister: There are tensions in the EU’s position, and some hard facts for it. The Commission has suggested that an “off the shelf” model is the only option available to the UK, but it has also said that in certain areas, none of the EU’s third-country agreements would be appropriate; and the agreement envisaged in the European Council’s own guidelines would not be delivered by a Canada-style deal. Finally, we need to face the fact that this is a negotiation, and neither side can have exactly what we want. However, I am confident that we can reach agreement, so I am proposing the broadest and deepest possible future economic partnership, covering more sectors and involving fuller co-operation than any previous free trade agreement.

There are five foundations that must underpin our trading relationship: first, reciprocal binding commitments to ensure fair and open competition, so that UK business can compete fairly in EU markets and vice versa; secondly, an independent arbitration mechanism; thirdly, an ongoing dialogue with the EU, including between regulators; fourthly, an arrangement for data protection that goes beyond an adequacy agreement; and, fifthly, free movement will come to an end. But UK and EU citizens will still want to work and study in each other’s countries, and we are open to discussions about how to maintain the links between our people.

We then need to tailor this partnership to the needs of our economies, and we should be absolutely clear this is not cherry-picking. Every free trade agreement has varying market access depending on the respective interests of the countries involved. So if this is cherry-picking, then so is every trade arrangement. What matters is that our rights and obligations are held in balance.

On goods, a fundamental principle in our negotiating strategy is that trade at the UK-EU border is as frictionless as possible, with no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. This means no tariffs or quotas, and ensuring that products only need to undergo one series of approvals in one country. To achieve this, we will need a comprehensive system of mutual recognition. That can be delivered through a commitment to ensure that the relevant UK regulatory standards remain as high as the EU’s, which, in practice, means that UK and EU regulatory standards will remain substantially similar in future. Our default is that UK law may not necessarily be identical to EU law, but it should achieve the same outcomes. In some cases, Parliament might choose to pass an identical law. If the Parliament of the day decided not to achieve the same outcomes as EU law, it would be in the knowledge that there may be consequences for our market access. And we will need an independent mechanism to oversee these arrangements, which I have been clear cannot be the European Court of Justice.

We also want to explore the terms on which the UK could remain part of EU agencies, such as those critical to the chemicals, medicines and aerospace industries. That would mean abiding by the rules of those agencies and making an appropriate financial contribution, and the UK would also have to respect the remit of the ECJ in that regard. Parliament could decide not to accept these rules, but with consequences for our membership and linked market access rights.
Lastly, to achieve as frictionless a border as possible and to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, we also need an agreement on customs. The UK has been clear it is leaving the customs union. The EU has also formed a customs union with some other countries, but those arrangements, if applied to the UK, would mean the EU setting the UK’s external tariffs, being able to let other countries sell more into the UK, without making it any easier for us to sell more to them, or the UK signing up to the common commercial policy.

That would not be compatible with a meaningful independent trade policy, and it would mean we had less control than we have now over our trade in the world, so we have set out two potential options for our customs arrangement: a customs partnership where, at the border, the UK would mirror the EU’s requirements for imports from the rest of the world for those goods arriving in the UK and intended for the EU, or a highly streamlined customs arrangement, where we would jointly implement a range of measures to minimise frictions, together with specific provisions for Northern Ireland. Both would leave the UK free to determine its own tariffs, which would not be possible in a customs union.

Taken together, the approach we have set out on goods and agencies, and the options for a customs arrangement, provide the basis for a good solution to the very specific challenges for Northern Ireland and Ireland. My commitment to this could not be stronger: we will not go back to a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland; nor will we break up the United Kingdom’s own common market with a border down the Irish sea. As Prime Minister, I am not going to let our departure from the EU do anything to set back the historic progress made in Northern Ireland; nor will I allow anything that would damage the integrity of our precious Union. The UK and Irish Governments and the European Commission will be working together to ensure we fulfil these commitments.

That approach to trade in goods is important for agriculture, food and drink, but here other considerations apply. We are leaving the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, and will want to take the opportunity to reform our agriculture and fisheries management and regain control of access to our waters. I fully expect that our standards will remain at least as high as the EU’s, but it will be particularly important to secure flexibility here to make the most of our withdrawal from the EU for our farmers and exporters. We will also want to continue to work together to manage shared stocks in a sustainable way, and agree reciprocal access to waters and a fairer allocation of fishing opportunities for the UK fishing industry.

On services, we have the opportunity to break new ground with a broader agreement than ever before. For example, broadcasting and financial services have never previously been meaningfully covered in a free trade agreement. We recognise that we cannot have the rights of membership of the single market, such as the country of origin principle or passporting, but we should explore creative options, including mutual recognition, to allow broadcasting across borders. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor will set out more detail on financial services later this week. We will also look to agree an appropriate labour mobility framework that enables travel to provide services in person, as well as continued mutual recognition of professional qualifications. Finally, our partnership will need to cover agreements in other areas, including energy, transport, digital, civil judicial co-operation, a far-reaching science and innovation pact, and cultural and educational programmes.

We cannot escape the complexity of the task ahead. We must build a new and lasting relationship, while preparing for every scenario, but with pragmatism, and calm and patient discussion. I am confident we can set an example to the world. Yes, there will be ups and downs over the months ahead, but we will not be buffeted by the demands to talk tough or threaten a walk out, and we will not give in to the counsels of despair that this simply cannot be done—for this is in both the UK and EU’s interests. As we go forwards, foremost in my mind is the pledge I made on my first day as Prime Minister: to act not in the interests of the privileged few, but in the interests of all our people, and to make Britain a country that works for everyone. My message to our friends in Europe is clear. You asked us to set out what we want in more detail. We have done that. We have shown we understand your principles. We have a shared interest in getting this right, so let us get on with it. I commend this statement to the House.

3.47 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of the statement. Twenty months have passed since the referendum, and a year has passed since article 50 was triggered—20 wasted months in which the arrogance of some in the Cabinet, who said that it would be the easiest deal in history, has turned into debilitating in-fighting. We have seen set-piece speech after set-piece speech, yet the Prime Minister still cannot bring clarity to the negotiations or certainty to British businesses or workers.

The Prime Minister’s speech on Friday promised to unite the nation, yet it barely papered over the cracks in her own party. Even her own Minister for the Cabinet Office said that it was only “an ambitious opening bid”, so who knows where we will end up? The European Union published a detailed legal document last Wednesday; despite the criticisms rightly made from across the House, where is anything comparable in detail and focus from the UK Government? The reality is that the speech failed to deliver any clear and credible solution to the problems we face. This Government’s shambolic approach to Brexit risks taking us down a dangerous road. This Government’s reckless strategy is putting our jobs and manufacturing industries at risk.

The Prime Minister’s only clear priority seems to be to tie the UK permanently to EU rules that have been used to enforce privatisation and block support for industry. [Interruption.] The Prime Minister now seems to be saying that we will lose some access to European markets and that Britain will be worse off. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I said that the Prime Minister must not be subjected to orchestrated heckling and attempts to shout her down. The same goes for the Leader of the Opposition. Let me give notice now to some of the people who are shouting loudly: if you want to persist in that behaviour, do not be surprised if

[The Prime Minister]
you do not catch my eye in the questioning. If you want to be called, behave; if you wish to persist with misbehaviour, frankly, you might as well leave the Chamber now.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Does the Prime Minister now agree that the Brexit Secretary was wrong when he told the House of Commons in January last year that a Tory Brexit deal will deliver the “exact same benefits” as the single market and the customs union? If so, why has it taken her so long to say so?

In her speech, the Prime Minister said that she wants “good access”. Can she make it clear today whether that means tariff-free access? The Prime Minister said that she wants a “customs arrangement”, but does that cover all sectors of industry or just some? Which will be excluded, and with what consequences in terms of tariffs and other barriers? Does the Prime Minister still think that a good trade deal can easily be reached with the Trump presidency after its unilateral imposition of tariffs on steel and aluminium imports, which follows its disgraceful attack on Bombardier?

It is possible to retain the benefits of the single market and the customs union. The problem is that we have a Prime Minister who is being held hostage by the extremes in her Cabinet who are willing to sacrifice parts of British business and industry and willing to risk a hard border in Northern Ireland to carry on with their ideological crusade to shrink the state, slash investment and bring about an economic race to the bottom.

The Prime Minister said in her speech that, in areas like workers’ rights and the environment, “we will not engage in a race to the bottom in the standards and protections…There is no…political constituency in the UK which would support this”.

That simply is not true. In the recent past, we have seen the Secretary of State for International Trade write:

“It is intellectually unsustainable to believe that workplace rights should remain untouched”.

The Leader of the House has said:

“I envisage there being…no regulation whatsoever—no minimum wage, no maternity or paternity rights, no…dismissal rights, no pension rights”. [Official Report, 10 May 2012; Vol. 545, c. 209.]

The Foreign Secretary has described EU-derived employment legislation as “back-breaking”, and in its leaked assessments, the exit analysis from the Department for Exiting the European Union stated that there could be opportunities for the UK in deregulating in areas such as the environment and employment law. There clearly is a political constituency that supports a race to the bottom on workplace rights: it is called the Cabinet.

On the crucial issue of Northern Ireland, the Prime Minister offered no real solution. Instead, she rehashed an already discredited Government idea to use a mix of technology and good will to ensure no hard border—an idea that the Brexit Secretary has already conceded is mere “blue-sky thinking”. Does the Prime Minister not understand that this is not just about cross-border paperwork and trade? There is also the issue of maintaining the social peace that has endured for 20 years. Will she condemn the ridiculous remarks made by the Foreign Secretary last week, when he not only compared the Irish border to that of Camden and Islington, but wrote her a letter saying it was not the British Government’s responsibility to prevent a hard border?

There are some things we do welcome in the Prime Minister’s statement—[Interruption.] I knew Members would be pleased. For one, it is clear that she has now abandoned her ridiculous red line regarding any role for the European Court of Justice, which opens the door to her welcome adoption of Labour’s position of the UK remaining a key part of the European Union agencies that are of benefit to this country.

As I set out last week, Labour’s priority is to get the best Brexit deal for jobs and living standards to underpin our plans to upgrade the economy and invest in every region and every community in this country. The Conservative Government’s reckless austerity is damaging our country, and the increasing sense of drift over Brexit risks increasing that damage. Now the Prime Minister admits that her Brexit plan will reduce our access to European markets and leave people worse off. We have had 20 months of promises, soundbites and confusion. However people feel about Brexit, it is clear to them that this Government are nowhere near delivering a good deal for Britain.

The Prime Minister: The Leader of the Opposition raised a number of issues. First, he raised the issue of steel tariffs and the position of the United States of America, and I spoke to President Trump about this yesterday. May I just say to the right hon. Gentleman that we are much more likely to get a positive result by engaging with the United States of America than by standing on the sidelines sniping and shouting at them, as he always does?

The right hon. Gentleman talks about workers’ rights and other standards. We have been very clear; this Government are not just maintaining workers’ rights, but enhancing them; and we are committed to maintaining high environmental standards. He asked whether we want a deal that was tariff-free. I gave him the statement in advance, so if he had read it, he would know that I referred to tariff-free access in my statement. He talks about ideological crusades, and I have to say that only person in this House—[Interruption.] Well, not the only person, because the shadow Chancellor is also on an ideological crusade.

There is a fundamental flaw at the heart of what the Leader of the Opposition has chosen as his approach towards the European Union and the post-Brexit relationship. He talks about free trade agreements with the European Union, yet he is clear that he would go against one of the key elements of ensuring that we could have such trade deals, notably the issue around state aid. He would tear up rules on state aid and fair competition, as he does not believe in fair competition—that is perfectly clear.

At the very beginning of the right hon. Gentleman’s remarks, he asked about the withdrawal agreement—the draft legal text on the withdrawal agreement that was published by the European Union last week—and he referred to my speech last Friday as if it was about the same thing. I have to tell him that it was not, actually, so may I just explain? There are three issues and three elements of the process at the moment. We are negotiating the final arrangements for the implementation period, which we hope will be agreed in March—we certainly
intend that they will be. Alongside that, we are looking at the legal text of the withdrawal agreement—Michel Barnier has made it clear that, on his timetable, we would be looking at October for that—and we now want to start negotiations on the future economic partnership and the future security partnership.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the European Court of Justice. The jurisdiction of the Court in the United Kingdom will end. We will bring back control of our laws to this Parliament—to this country— unlike the Labour party’s position, which is to remain in the single market and, in effect, remain under the jurisdiction of the ECJ. We will also take control of our borders, unlike the Labour party’s position—Well, Labour Members do not seem to know what their position is. The Leader of the Opposition said that the Labour party would bring free movement to an end, but at the same time the shadow Brexit Secretary said that “easy movement” would continue. We know that Labour Members would not bring back control of money, because they have said that they would pay whatever it takes to the European Union regardless.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about delays. This Government are focusing on making a success of Brexit and on delivering for the British people, but Labour has nothing to offer. Labour voted against moving on the negotiations in the European Parliament. Labour Members twice voted against the Bill that delivers Brexit in this Parliament; now they have gone back on what they promised on the customs union; and over a week ago the shadow Chancellor said that Labour would keep “all options open” on whether or not to have a second referendum. This Government and this party are clear: there will be no second referendum. We are delivering for the British people, and we are going to make a success of it.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend. Friend on what I thought was an excellent speech—clear and determined, giving the European Union a very clear sense of direction. I thought that perhaps the most important point in the speech—the point voted on in the referendum—was about taking back control, so does she agree that bringing back to a British Parliament all decisions about our arrangements is exactly about delivering on that? When she gets into negotiations about trade arrangements with her European counterparts, will she remind them that cake exists to be eaten and cherries exist to be picked?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. He is absolutely right that when people voted in the referendum to leave the European Union, they voted to take back control of our borders, our money and our laws. We are absolutely clear that when we have left the European Union, decisions over our laws and standards will be for this Parliament to take. We will take back control.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for early sight of her statement.

It is now over 18 months since the referendum. At a time when the United Kingdom should be putting the finishing touches to its negotiating position, this Government are still struggling to find paper on which to write down their wish list. It was nothing short of a humiliation for the Government last week that when the EU presented a draft legal text for withdrawal, the Prime Minister gave a speech expounding empty rhetoric one more time.

No single market and no customs union mean that there is no solution that would prevent a hard border in Ireland. The Government’s own analysis has revealed that growth would be hit by up to 9% in such an extreme scenario. Scottish Government analysis revealed that Scots could face a loss of £2,300 per person each year, with our GDP around £12.7 billion lower by 2030. That is the reality of the Government’s plans.

Last month, as the Prime Minister gathered with her Cabinet at Chequers, there was one glaring absence. Where was the Secretary of State for Scotland? Scotland’s voice was not heard at those crucial Cabinet discussions. There has been a flagrant disregard by this Government of the nations that make up the United Kingdom. The Scottish Secretary might not have been invited to Chequers, but rest assured that Members on these Benches will be in this Chamber, speaking up for Scotland at every opportunity—

Mr Speaker: Order. A very sizeable number of Scottish Conservative Members are waving at the right hon. Gentleman. Mr Ross, you are leading with your flag, at which you have very considerable experience. Mr Blackford, what I would say to you is: KBO, man—just keep going.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

We will settle for nothing less than continued membership of the single market and customs union. Scotland voted to stay in the EU. We cannot—we will not—be ripped out of the single market and customs union against our will. We will defend the jobs that the Prime Minister is prepared to trade away. We in Scotland must determine our own destiny. We are a European nation and we intend to stay one. Will the Prime Minister finally recognise that staying in the single market and the customs union is the least damaging outcome for jobs and prosperity?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about having Scottish nationalist MPs in this House, but I note that there are only nine here today, which is, of course, fewer than the number of Conservative Scottish Members of Parliament. The decisions that led to the approach in my speech were taken by the whole Cabinet, not by a sub-group of the Cabinet, and all members, bar one who was in this House at the time, were present when that decision was taken.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about timing. Like the Leader of the Opposition, he appears to have misunderstood the fact that the European Union set out at the beginning that there would be different phases to this negotiation. I was always straight with the House that I believed that citizens’ rights should be in the first phase. They were; we agreed that in December. Many people, including possibly the right hon. Gentleman—I cannot remember—were sceptical about whether we would get that deal. We did get that deal, and now we move on to the second phase of the negotiations.

May I say to the right hon. Gentleman that, yet again, he has tunnel vision on there being only one approach to take on a single market and a customs union?
We will ensure that we get trade with the European Union that is tariff-free and as frictionless as possible; that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland; and that this country will be able to run an independent trade policy, negotiating trade deals around the rest of the world.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman talks about Scotland as an independent nation taking decisions. Yet again, I remind him that, from the point of view of Scotland's economy, the most important thing is to be part of the United Kingdom.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The Prime Minister speaks for the big majority of the British people when she says that both sides now need to get on with it. Will she confirm that the British Government will ensure that we are ready to leave in March 2019, with or without a deal, and with or without a positive response from the EU?

The Prime Minister: I can reassure my right hon. Friend that we will be leaving in March 2019 and that we continue to work on all scenarios to ensure that we are ready.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Although the Prime Minister's speech provided some welcome additional detail on her view of the future partnership, the Irish Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney, said yesterday that she had not done so when it comes to “maintaining a largely invisible border on the island of Ireland.” Regardless of the means that she has in mind for achieving that, is she able today to give a guarantee to businesses in Northern Ireland and the Republic that their manufactured goods and agricultural products will be able to cross the border without checks, controls or infrastructure when we leave the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's opening remark in which he said that I had provided more detail in the speech I gave on Friday. He might like to have a discussion with the Leader of the Opposition about the fact that there was such detail in the speech.

We will not return to a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. We want that free flow of goods, services and people to be able to continue—of course we are committed to the common travel area—and we also want the free flow of goods, services and people between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. That is why we took the position that we did on the proposal that came forward last week from the European Commission. That would have meant a border down the Irish sea, which is unacceptable.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): No one can doubt the determination of our Prime Minister to get the very best deal for our country in these most difficult of negotiations. In her speech on Friday, she was frank about the complexity and economic consequences of the deal that she seeks with the European Union. In the spirit of that frankness, and given that it is undoubtedly the case that any deal will bear considerable administrative costs, will the Prime Minister undertake to keep this House, and therefore our constituents, fully apprised of those administrative costs of our eventual relationship and deal with the European Union?

The Prime Minister: As we have said before, we will of course make information available to this House, when it is possible to do so, as we go through this process of negotiation. A certain amount of information has already been made available, for example about the amount of money that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer set aside for the contingency preparations that are being made by Departments. My right hon. Friend will be aware of some of the other steps that we have taken, including setting up two new Departments when I became Prime Minister, to ensure that we had a Department focused on exiting the European Union and another—the Department for International Trade—focused absolutely on making a success of the opportunities that will be open to us once we have left the EU.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Prime Minister is still proposing that we will be outside a customs union and have different external tariffs and commercial policies, which she knows will mean burdensome rules of origin checks, and customs checks on goods crossing borders to ensure that businesses do not evade or avoid those different external tariffs. She has proposed that 80% of businesses in Ireland would be exempt from any of those checks, but she will be aware that security experts have warned of the risk from not just physical infrastructure at the border, but an increased incentive for smuggling, particularly given the links between smuggler groups and paramilitary organisations. Why is she continuing to pursue a policy on the customs union that involves a risk of increasing both the smuggling and security threats?

The Prime Minister: First, I remind the right hon. Lady that the 80% reference was in one of the options on future customs arrangements between Northern Ireland and Ireland. Of course, what I set out in the speech in relation to that border issue was about not just the customs arrangements, but the regulatory standards that this country will be following once we have left the European Union. We are not going to be in a customs union—we are not going to be in the customs union—because that would prevent us from being able to follow an independent trade policy, which is something that we should be following because we can see great opportunities for companies, businesses, jobs and prosperity in the UK as a result.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Given my right hon. Friend's confirmation in both her speech on Friday and her statement today that our EU policy rightly rests on fundamental UK principles in our national interest—namely, the sovereignty of our own Parliament and our own judiciary, our own democracy and the integrity of the United Kingdom—does she agree that the official Opposition's continuous unprincipled reversals of their policy betrays not only their own voters, but the country?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We consistently hear the Opposition saying one thing about their Brexit policy one minute and something else the next. Crucially, they would not be delivering for the British people, because they would stay in the single market and the customs union, they would see the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, and they
would continue to pay sums of money over to the European Union. Those are the very things that people voted against.

**Sir Vince Cable** (Twickenham) (LD): May I first congratulate the Prime Minister on the fact that, after 20 months of tough negotiation, she appears now to have delivered at least a trade deal with her own Cabinet? In her future independent trade negotiations with the economic nationalist and warmonger in the White House, what exactly are the Prime Minister’s red lines, and do they include the NHS?

**The Prime Minister:** I am absolutely clear that as we look to negotiate a trade deal with the United States of America, the national health service will remain as it is today. It will remain free at the point of use. The national health service is not for sale. We continue to stand by the principles of the NHS, and we will be very clear about that when we come to negotiating a trade deal with the United States.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Ah yes, a very well-behaved fellow—I call Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg.

**Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg** (North East Somerset) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for that compliment.

Does my right hon. Friend, having made such a generous offer to the European Union, expect more generosity than it has shown so far? I think particularly of the aggression in the draft legal text of suggesting a solution to the Irish problem that would have been in contradiction to the confidence and supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist party, threatening the existence of the Government. Does my right hon. Friend think that it is right for the European Commission to behave in such a high-handed fashion?

**The Prime Minister:** We are in a negotiation. Both sides put their positions at various stages. Just as the European Commission chose to put that position forward, so it was absolutely right for this Government to be clear—I repeated it last week in Prime Minister’s questions and I am happy to do so again—that the suggestion that there should be a border down the Irish sea separating Northern Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom is completely unacceptable to this Government and, I believe, to any Government in the United Kingdom.

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): On Friday and today, the Prime Minister said that our immigration rules on that, and we will stand ready to negotiate, and thus that there is no good reason why researchers and those in the health and care workforce who seek to work and study in each other’s countries?

**The Prime Minister:** When we leave the European Union, free movement, which has been one of the pillars of the EU, will end. However, as I said in my statement and in my speech on Friday, EU citizens will continue to want to work and study here, and UK citizens will continue to want to work and study in the EU27. We will be setting out proposals for our immigration rules on that, and we will stand ready to discuss the arrangements that will be made in future.

**Emma Little Pengelly** (Belfast South) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for her robust rejection of the disgraceful European Union attempts to interfere in the internal constitutional affairs of our sovereign United Kingdom. Does she agree that in finding and pursuing the customs solutions outlined today, there is nothing—nothing—that could create additional barriers or additional requirements in relation to Northern Ireland’s trade with Great Britain in the internal market of the United Kingdom?

**The Prime Minister:** I am very happy to make it clear that we are looking for an arrangement that both maintains the internal market of the United Kingdom and ensures that we have no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. We have set out proposals on how we can achieve that. I look forward to discussing those with the European Commission, and also with the Taoiseach and the Irish Government.

**Sir Nicholas Soames** (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will the Prime Minister confirm that the Commission is now in clear about that when we come to negotiating a trade deal with the European Union, together with trade deals with countries around the rest of the world, and that we develop our economy so that we have a Britain fit for the future.

**Dr Sarah Wollaston** (Totnes) (Con): The Prime Minister is rightly putting the needs of patients first in seeking associate membership of the European Medicines Agency. Will she go further in doing the same and commit to freedom of movement, both now and in future, for researchers and those in the health and care workforce who seek to work and study in each other’s countries?

**The Prime Minister:** Absolutely. The European Union asked for more detail to be set out. I said that I would do that at the appropriate time. I have now done so both on security and on our economic partnership. My message to the European Union in relation to the negotiations is, “Let’s get on with it.”

**Kate Hoey** (Vauxhall) (Lab): The Prime Minister made some very sensible suggestions in her speech about the relationship with regard to the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Has she read a very good report by the European Parliament’s Committee on Constitutional Affairs about how the border issue can be solved by innovative technology and so on? Will she make sure that her officials also read that before they go back into negotiations?
The Prime Minister: I can tell the hon. Lady that I am aware of that report and have asked officials to look at it very carefully. I believe it gives some very good proposals for solutions.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s commitment yet again to leave the common fisheries policy and the common agricultural policy—a commitment that is very welcome in my constituency in Scotland, which might surprise some Opposition Members. What impact does she think this new freedom will have on those sectors?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, we have to set our new agricultural policy and fisheries policy, but I believe that these freedoms will open up new opportunities for fishermen and farmers across the whole United Kingdom.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Could the Prime Minister name an international border between two countries that are not in a customs union and have different external tariffs where there are no checks on lorries carrying goods at the border?

The Prime Minister: There are many examples of different arrangements for customs around the rest of the world. Indeed, we are looking at those—including, for example, the border between the United States and Canada.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement and congratulate her on a calm speech that has been widely welcomed. It was based on both the principles she has consistently set out towards leaving the European Union and the realistic compromises this nation will have to make to achieve a comprehensive trade agreement. Do we not now owe it to her to get behind her and her negotiations, instead of undermining her all the time, as the Opposition are doing?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. I think it would be a much stronger position if the Opposition were to get behind the Government and agree to support the approach we are taking to get the best possible deal were we to get behind the Government and agree to support it; it would be a much stronger position if the Opposition made reference to trade remedies. Of course it is very important that we are able to determine those trade remedies, rather than leaving it to the European Union to determine them for us, as would happen under the policy of the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend clarify that, contrary to the comments made by the Leader of the Opposition, the establishment of an independent arbitration mechanism will mean that the ECJ will not have jurisdiction over our future relationship?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Chancellor of the Exchequer will soon give us the spring statement. At that moment, the Office for Budget Responsibility will publish its financial outlook for our country. What instructions has the Prime Minister given to the OBR for it to produce that forecast? What has she informed it of her new policy for Brexit?

The Prime Minister: The OBR is an independent body. It determines its own forecasts and makes its own judgments about the future, and we look forward to seeing what it brings forward at the time of the spring statement.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): President Trump’s threats over steel products remind us that, alongside an independent trade policy, we need independent and effective trade enforcement and trade defence measures. What assurance can the Prime Minister give the House that we will have those systems in place from day one when we leave the European Union?

The Prime Minister: We are indeed working on ensuring that we have the necessary structures in place, and legislation will be brought forward to this House in due course in relation to those issues. My right hon. Friend made reference to trade remedies. Of course it is very important that we are able to determine those trade remedies, rather than leaving it to the European Union to determine them for us, as would happen under the policy of the Leader of the Opposition.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Since the Brexit that the Prime Minister has set out is nothing like the Brexit we were promised—no “exact same benefits”, and far from £350 million a week for the NHS, we have nurses actually leaving the NHS and fewer coming in—does she not think it will be right to give the people the right to have a say on the final deal?

The Prime Minister: We actually have more nurses working on wards in the NHS now than we did in 2010. The British people were given a vote by this Parliament on membership of the European Union, and we are delivering on their decision.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The Prime Minister has consistently said that she wants a unique Brexit trade deal for Britain, and she has said again today that Canada and Norway are not the models for us. Is she...
aware that Angela Merkel has pointed out that Norway has a population of only 4 million, and Canada has a population of only 36 million and trades with the United States? Is the Prime Minister as pleased as I am that Angela Merkel has been able to form a Government, and does she agree that Angela Merkel, being the pragmatic lady she is, will have considerable influence on the European Union in securing a good deal for the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I was pleased to speak to Chancellor Merkel yesterday to congratulate her on the formation of her Government. I look forward to the negotiations we will be having with Germany and the other members of the European Union. She and others have all been clear that, as we look to the future relationship, we must recognise that the models that already exist do not meet the requirements of the United Kingdom.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has been forced to admit that market access will be less. She wants to be straight with the public. This time last year, she promised that we would have “the same benefits in terms of that free access to trade.” Does she regret that?

The Prime Minister: We are setting out on negotiating a free trade deal that will ensure that, for goods, we continue to have tariff-free and as frictionless as possible trade across borders. We have also set out our ambition for financial services, digital services, broadcasting and a whole range of other areas. We will be achieving the benefits of the trade with the European Union in some cases in different ways, but that does not mean that we are not going to have the benefits of a good trading relationship with the European Union in future.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s pragmatic approach to the negotiations with the EU, and her ongoing commitment to getting the best deal for Britain. Does she agree with me that by fixing the roof and eliminating the day-to-day budget deficit, Britain is now in a much stronger position to be able to forge new trading relationships with the rest of the world, as well as the EU, and make a success of Brexit?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. It is of course the decisions that have been taken by Conservatives in government since 2010, which have put our economy in a much stronger position, that enable us to be able to do those very good trade deals. If we just look at what has happened recently—productivity is up, borrowing is down, employment is up—this is a strong economy, and we should have optimism about our future.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Siemens is doing great work in east Yorkshire—in Hull, with a renewables factory, and in Goole, with plans for a train factory—so will the Prime Minister tell me whether she believes there will be the same access to European markets for Siemens once we have left the EU in March 2019?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased to welcome the investment—and the continued investment—that Siemens is making in the United Kingdom. I meet the senior directors of Siemens from time to time to discuss their investment in the United Kingdom. We have been clear, as I said in my speech on Friday, that we have been listening to businesses. That is one of the reasons why we have talked about maintaining high regulatory standards in goods crossing borders, so that we can maintain that good trade access between the United Kingdom and the European Union in the future.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on a reassuringly and typically business-like speech on Friday? It sent a clear message that there will be no hard Brexit, only hard choices. Will she reassure me and the UK life sciences sector that her proposal for associate membership of the European Medicines Agency means that we will be able to sell medicines into Europe and continue to lead in the pioneering technologies of tomorrow’s medicines?

The Prime Minister: I am very clear about the important role that the life sciences industry plays in the United Kingdom, and I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done with it here in the United Kingdom. We wish to explore the possibility of some form of associate membership of those agencies. That is in the interests not just of the UK but of people across the EU, in terms of getting medicines to market more quickly.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The European Union has published the draft text of its legal stance of its negotiating position. The Prime Minister makes a speech, which does give more detail, but is still full of ambiguity. When will she publish the legal text of her negotiating stance?

The Prime Minister: I did try to explain this to the Leader of the Opposition, but I will have another go. The legal text that was published by the European Commission is not a legal text on its negotiations for the future economic or security partnership; it is a legal text on withdrawal agreement. We are working on that with the Commission, but what I have done is set out, from the United Kingdom’s point of view, what we want to see from our future economic partnership, just as I set out our future security partnership in Munich a few weeks ago. We now wait for the response from the European Union to our putting out our proposals before they have put out theirs.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): In 389 days’ time, the United Kingdom will leave the dreadful European Union superstate. The Prime Minister will end the free movement of people; she will stop sending billions and billions of pounds to the EU each and every year; and we will make our own laws in our country, judged by our own judges. Does the Prime Minister find it slightly disconcerting that she is the first Conservative leader who has been able to unite those on these Benches on Europe?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased that on these Conservative Benches we are united in the aim of ensuring that we deliver on the vote of the British people, we leave the European Union and we do it with a good deal that leads to an optimistic future for this country.
Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): It is obvious that the Prime Minister sees a US trade deal as something of a priority, so will she guarantee that there will be no sacrifice of either the interests of UK farmers or our animal welfare and environmental standards in order to secure such a deal?

The Prime Minister: The United States has expressed interest in a trade deal with us—so have a number of other countries around the world, such as Australia and others—but as I have said, and as the Environment Secretary and others have said, we remain committed to high animal welfare and environmental standards.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Were a settlement close, how will the Prime Minister react to entreaties to delay departure by agreement within article 50?

The Prime Minister: It is our intention to ensure that we can negotiate what is necessary to negotiate within the time scale that is set within article 50.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Yesterday, I had an email from a senior businessman in the north-east, who says that the Prime Minister and her Cabinet “seem to ignore...the real nature of global trade today...Our businesses wishing to trade with China or the USA build new facilities there”.

They do not “send goods halfway around the globe...We...want...to share in existing EU arrangements”. Why does the Prime Minister not start listening to the CBI and the chambers of commerce?

The Prime Minister: The CBI, the chambers of commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses welcomed what I set out in my speech on Friday as an ambitious programme, and welcomed the degree of detail in my speech. We are listening to business. That is why I put what I did in my speech about regulatory standards.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): As a Conservative, it is always pleasing when pragmatism trumps ideology, but as a Unionist, it is vital that our departure from the EU does not undermine the political, constitutional or economic integrity of our Union. Can the Prime Minister confirm that it is her position that there will never be any differentiated deal for any constituent part of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I am absolutely clear that we want to maintain the United Kingdom. This is a precious Union of four nations but one people, and it is in the economic interests of all parts of the United Kingdom that we maintain the internal market of the United Kingdom. We do not want to see, and we will not see, Brexit leading to any break-up of the United Kingdom.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) asked earlier where an example could be found of a border between jurisdictions. The Prime Minister gave the example of the border between Canada and the United States as being soft and frictionless. There are guns and armed customs guards on that border. Surely that is not what she has in mind? Can she perhaps find another example?

The Prime Minister: What I said was that we are looking at the border arrangements in a number of countries around the world. We are looking not just at the border arrangements the European Union has with a number of countries—it has a variety of customs arrangements with various countries—but more widely around the world. I have set out what I believe is a future arrangement for customs that will suit the United Kingdom and the European Union, and will ensure no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. As the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) pointed out, this has been picked up in the European Parliament and it has been made clear that there are innovative solutions that can deliver exactly what we are talking about.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister for her speech on Friday and her statement in the House today. With record inward investment, record manufacturing output and record low unemployment for a generation, when does she think economic reality is going to dawn on the doomsters on the Opposition Benches, particularly when it comes to the economic prize that will be available once we have left the EU?

The Prime Minister: Unfortunately, the Opposition are turning their face away from what is actually happening in our economy: productivity up, employment up, borrowing down. We are seeing good results in our economy, but there is more we can be doing. I am optimistic about what we can achieve through our trade arrangements with the EU in the future, but also, as we go outside and become a much more outward-looking country, with an independent trade policy.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Prime Minister said that last week’s speech was not about draft withdrawal agreements produced by the EU, and I understand that. However, in answer to a number of questions from hon. Members today, she has suggested that that draft withdrawal agreement does not accurately reflect what she agreed to in December. If that is the case, when is she going to produce an alternative draft that does reflect accurately what she agreed to in December?

The Prime Minister: What I have said about the draft withdrawal agreement is that the European Commission chose to put in it—it is a lengthy document—a particular reference to the issue of the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. That was the third option in the December joint report. The Taoiseach and I are both very clear that we want to resolve the issue using the first option in the report, notably the UK’s overall relationship with the European Union. There are ways in which all three options can be developed, including that third option, which is different from that produced by the European Commission, and that produced by the European Commission could not be accepted by the UK Government.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Competition policy is the glue that holds together all free trade agreements. Does the Prime Minister agree that the suggestion from the Labour party that it could somehow remain in the single market while running reckless through state aid policy is a fantasy fiction drama worthy of an Oscar?
The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She has hit the nail on the head.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): My constituency neighbour, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), may tell the Prime Minister that cherries are there to be picked and cake is there to be eaten, but however sweet it seems fudge is no way to run the country. So can she tell us straight? There are £400 million of public contracts that have full or partial EU funding and are due to expire in the next four months. Does she intend to renew or replace them, many of which are with education and skills facilities, or does she need to find a bus to write it on first?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, while we are still members of the European Union, we are looking at maintaining our relationships within the EU and maintaining our obligations and rights as a member of the EU. One issue that will be looked at in relation to the withdrawal agreement is what happens to contracts that are in place at the point at which we leave and what arrangements will pertain to those contracts.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I welcome the balance and realism in the Prime Minister’s speech. To allay the concerns of those who have continually argued that the only deal available to us would be a clone of previous deals with other countries, will my right hon. Friend confirm today that both her Government and the European Commission’s preparations show clearly that the deal reached with us will be unique, bespoke and multi-tiered, and will confirm the continuing existence of many areas of co-operation between our two areas, while respecting the result of the referendum?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a relationship that we will be building across a number of areas. I have spoken specifically about economic partnership and in most detail about the goods trade between the EU and the UK in the future. There is the security partnership as well and our relationship but a continuing good relationship with the EU. There is a whole range of areas in which we will be building a new working on civil judicial co-operation. There is a whole future. There is the security partnership as well and our relationship but a continuing good relationship with the EU. One issue that will be looked at in relation to the withdrawal agreement is what happens to contracts that are in place at the point at which we leave and what arrangements will pertain to those contracts.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a relationship that we will be building across a number of areas. I have spoken specifically about economic partnership and in most detail about the goods trade between the EU and the UK in the future. There is the security partnership as well and our relationship but a continuing good relationship with the EU. One issue that will be looked at in relation to the withdrawal agreement is what happens to contracts that are in place at the point at which we leave and what arrangements will pertain to those contracts.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The reality, unfortunately, is that the hard Brexit that the Prime Minister is now pursuing will lead inexorably and inevitably to a hard border in Northern Ireland. Between Canada and the United States, there are border checks of exactly the kind that she rightly says—unlike the Foreign Secretary—that she does not want in Northern Ireland. Will she confirm that she cannot name a single example anywhere in the world of an international border with no customs union and no border checks? It is a fantasy.

The Prime Minister: The Opposition need to stop thinking in this binary fashion—that either you are in a customs union or you cannot have suitable customs arrangements. This is exactly the problem. We have set out very clearly the options that are available. I have elaborated on another aspect of the relationship—notably, the regulatory standards. These two go together in building that trade relationship, which means no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on the pragmatic tone of her statement and her speech, which fits the natural tenor of our party, as well as our country? May I also congratulate her on her recognition of the importance of civil judicial co-operation in this matter, but will she accept that, consistent with the findings of the Justice Committee in the last Parliament, the Lugano convention arrangements are not a sufficient basis on which we should seek to go forward, as they are both more costly and slower than the existing procedures? We need something better than that.

The Prime Minister: We will be looking very closely at the arrangements that we want to put in place in relation to civil judicial co-operation. What is interesting about the Lugano convention is that it shows that the European Union is willing to enter into arrangements with other countries, so there is no reason why we cannot do that once we have left the European Union.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): If continued ease of trade with Europe for our financial services firms, broadcasters, insurance providers and IT companies ends up being dependent on an EU immigration regime that is broadly similar to that which we have at the moment, what will the Prime Minister choose: the economy or her precious immigration targets?

The Prime Minister: When the British people voted to leave the European Union, one of the issues that they were voting on was the need for this country to take control of its borders to bring an end to free movement, and we will do exactly that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes. Another very well-behaved young fellow, possibly now at the mid-point of his parliamentary career, but I am sure not beyond it—I call Sir Edward Leigh.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Thank you for picking the succulent cherry at last, Mr Speaker. It seems to many of us that the Prime Minister’s calm good sense is moving the country from the gloomy valley of “Project Fear,” peopled by the shades of former Prime Ministers, into the hopeful uplands of “Project Reality”. What could be more unifying and more Conservative than her pragmatic approach of proceeding by sensible, pragmatic and moderate steps to re-establish the sovereignty of Parliament?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend; I think that is absolutely right. Negotiations are taking time. They have been set out, as we know, in article 50 for those two years. What is important is that we approach them with the right, pragmatic, calm approach, but recognising in all this the optimistic future that lies ahead for the United Kingdom.
Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Prime Minister has one chance to pull back from the abyss described in her own impact assessment. Is she willing to stand up for the majority in this country who do not want the disastrous hard Brexit and give Parliament and the public a meaningful vote that includes the option of staying in the EU, and to vote for an exit from Brexit, or will she let herself be dragged down by the inconsequential and deluded men who sit on her Front Bench and become the third Conservative Prime Minister in history to be brought down by Europe?

The Prime Minister: There was a time when the Liberal Democrats actively wanted a referendum on EU membership. We gave the people a referendum, they voted, and there will be no second referendum, no exit from the EU membership. We gave the people a referendum, they voted, and there will be no second referendum, no exit from Brexit; we are leaving the EU and delivering on the vote of the people.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): May I thank the Prime Minister for her clear-sighted approach—as opposed to one that sees our negotiations with the EU through foggy red lenses of a battle between socialism and capitalism—and commitment to securing an agreement that is good for the whole UK and that will endure the test of time?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important point that nobody else has referenced: this agreement needs to endure. The worst thing would be if we came to an agreement that in a few years was beginning to unravel. It is important that the agreement be an arrangement and partnership with the EU that will, as she says, stand the test of time.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister accepted in her Mansion House speech last week that the UK would not be able to trade on the same terms with the EU post Brexit. Under her Government’s calculations, how much of a hit will her Brexit be to the UK economy?

The Prime Minister: The idea that we can benefit only from carrying on working in exactly the same way is wrong. We will have a different partnership and relationship with the EU. Yes, there are some hard choices for us to make and some areas where access will not be the same as in the past, but that does not mean that the country’s economy cannot go from strength to strength as a result of getting the right relationship with the EU and trading around the rest of the world.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): How can we best ensure that the considerable good will that many EU countries have towards the UK is fully reflected in the negotiating mandate given to Michel Barnier by the EU?

The Prime Minister: I discussed with President Tusk last week the approach that the UK thinks appropriate, and I hope that we can have a good and open dialogue in our future negotiations. I have set out my proposals for the UK’s future partnership, and we look forward to hearing from the EU what its proposals are.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): What will the Government do if any or all of the Prime Minister’s five tests are not met?

The Prime Minister: We are working to ensure that our five tests are met.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Canada did not pay anything for its comprehensive free trade deal with the EU. Given that we will be the biggest export market for EU goods after we leave and are offering a very generous divorce package, contingent on a deal, does my right hon. Friend agree that we should be expecting and demanding a much better deal than Canada got?

The Prime Minister: I am clear, and have said several times, that the relationship we already have with the EU is such that we are in a different position from Canada. We can have a free trade agreement and economic partnership that goes well beyond that which the EU negotiated with Canada.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has admitted that life will be different, so does she now accept her own Government’s comprehensive analysis, which many of us have been to see in the Treasury? It shows that the gains from trade will be offset by the losses and that there will be a hit to our economy in every scenario that involves leaving the single market and customs union—with borrowing going up, austerity continuing and deregulation coming through—and if not, can she explain how on earth this is in the national interest?

The Prime Minister: The analysis I think the hon. Gentleman is talking about did not actually analyse the sort of arrangements we are talking about for our future economic partnership.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): In her statement, my right hon. Friend reaffirmed her commitment to strengthening the UK as we leave the EU. Does she agree therefore that, if the Scottish Government are to be true to their word about reaching an agreement with her Government, they should immediately drop their plans for a dangerous and unwelcome EU continuity Bill, which is driving a sledgehammer through the devolution settlement?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend that the continuity Bills are unnecessary. What everybody needs to do—and certainly what we as a Government are doing—is focus on getting the arrangements right, particularly in relation to clause 11, and carry on negotiating to make sure we get it right for the future.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Staying in Euratom is vital for jobs and ground-breaking scientific research throughout the United Kingdom. Given that the Prime Minister now wants us to remain a member of EU agencies, and has accepted a role for the European Court of Justice, will she listen to those in the industry and ensure that we stay in Euratom?

The Prime Minister: I have referred to the interests that both the UK and the European Union have in maintaining a close relationship with Euratom in the future. Membership of Euratom is an integral part of membership of the European Union, and we are coming
out of Euratom as we are coming out of the EU, but, as the hon. Lady will know, we are making arrangements to ensure that we can maintain that close relationship.

Mr Speaker: I call Rebecca Pow.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was just about to give up.

Much as I love gardening, I do not grow cherries, but if I did, I would want to pick them, and if I had a surplus I would want to trade them, openly and fairly. Does the Prime Minister agree that we need a balance, supporting a wider range of sectors than other free trade agreements? Does she agree that that is in both our interests and that we must have fair and open competition for everyone?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her entrepreneurial spirit. She is absolutely right. We want to ensure that there is fair and free competition. I have referred to binding commitments in relation to state aid and competition because I think it important that if we are to have that free trade, we are able to do so on a basis that is truly, fairly competitive.

Mr Speaker: It is nevertheless of great interest to learn about the gardening habits of the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). I feel duly uplifted by that discovery. I simply say to the hon. Lady: never, never give up.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): At the time of the referendum, both Tony Blair and Sir John Major warned of exactly the scenario faced by the Prime Minister now in relation to the Northern Ireland-Republic border, which is presumably why a majority of people in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the European Union. If everything is as plain sailing as the Prime Minister suggests, why has the Foreign Secretary written her a memo entertaining the prospect of a hard border? Given that he has undertaken to publish that memo but has not found time to do so, perhaps the Prime Minister could prod him—or even jab him as hard as necessary—to get that memo out of him as soon as possible.

The Prime Minister: The answer to the hon. Gentleman’s question is that the Foreign Secretary has not said that. He is absolutely clear that there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. That is the position of the Government, and that is what we are working on. We have set out proposals, and I look forward to discussing them with the Commission and the Irish Government.

Wes Streeting: Clip him round the earhole. Get the memo out of him.

Mr Speaker: Order. That is very discourteous behaviour. Let us hear from another well-behaved individual. Ah, yes: Jeremy Lefroy.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I am not sure that my family would say that.

May I thank my right hon. Friend for two things in particular? The first is her absolute upholding of the United Kingdom—our United Kingdom—and our internal trade within our United Kingdom. The second is her point about the frictionless border. In my area of the west midlands, that is incredibly important. We are manufacturing exporters, and we rely on “just in time” deliveries to enable us to export our fine products around the world.

The Prime Minister: The point about the importance of the integrated supply chains that we now see across the UK and the rest of the European Union has been made to me, and to others in the Government, by businesses. That is precisely why I said what I did in my speech about regulatory standards. Many businesses have made it clear that, to maintain those supply chains, they need to be able to operate on the basis of the same regulatory standards. That is why we want to have that frictionless border, and why we have made proposals to do just that.

Mr Speaker: Let us hear from another very well-behaved person—in fact, a cerebral academic, I think. Nick Thomas-Symonds.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am most grateful for the compliments, Mr Speaker.

The Prime Minister has said that alignment is possible in two ways, either by having the same rules or by having the same consequences flowing from different rules. Which of those two categories will the automotive sector fit into, given that so many jobs in the country depend on it, not least in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: It will clearly be up to Parliament to decide which rules apply in the future. As I pointed out in my speech on Friday, the automotive industry is a very good example of what I said in response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) about integrated supply chains. We have been clear about this. Choices will be made about the areas where it is right—where Parliament will say that it wants an identical law, and where it wants the same outcome but wants to achieve it by a different means. Many businesses have made it very clear that they want to maintain the same regulatory standards, which is why that is one of the options that will be available.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Yesterday, Italy had its general election. My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and I met Luigi Di Maio, leader of the Five Star Movement, whose party has led in the results today. Over the last two years, Mr Di Maio and I have corresponded; he was my guest here in Parliament, and I invited the Foreign Secretary to meet him two years ago. Given the Prime Minister’s commitment to ensuring that this country has maximum access to the single market while coming out of free movement, which is exactly what Mr Di Maio has suggested Britain should have, should she not meet him as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: We are of course looking with interest at the results of the general election in Italy, and we will of course enter into discussions with the Italian Government when that Government are formed.
Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Prime Minister has struggled today to find any examples of a customs border without physical border checks, and indeed every expert we have heard in the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union has said that no such thing exists in the world, so how long does the Prime Minister think it will take to agree and implement this new thing in the world, if she thinks it is possible?

The Prime Minister: A number of Opposition Members suggest that we can adopt something only if somebody else is already doing it. Actually, what we have put forward is a number of proposals to deal with this issue of a customs arrangement, together with the commitments on regulatory standards that ensure we get that frictionless border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and we stand ready to sit down and discuss them with the Commission and the Irish Government.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Last week, Siemens announced a £200-million investment that will create 700 jobs in Goole. That proves the value of the economy of the north, so as the Prime Minister negotiates for Brexit, as well as obviously looking out for the interests of Northern Ireland, the City and Scotland, will she look out for the interests of the north? That requires approaching this process with flexibility, but it also means standing up for the voters of the north, who voted in huge numbers to leave, and who, since the referendum, have been patronised and insulted as being too thick, too northern or too racist.

The Prime Minister: The aim is to ensure that when we leave the European Union, we have a result that is good for the whole United Kingdom—not just Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but the whole of England, including the north. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that voters in the north of England voted overwhelmingly to leave the EU. This Parliament gave them that vote; it gave the people of the United Kingdom that vote, and it is right that we as politicians deliver on that, rather than talking, as the Liberal Democrats do, about a second referendum. The Labour party, too, will not rule out a referendum. The Labour party, too, will not rule out a second referendum. The Labour party, too, will not rule out a second referendum. The Labour party, too, will not rule out a second referendum. The Labour party, too, will not rule out a second referendum. The Labour party, too, will not rule out a second referendum. The Labour party, too, will not rule out a second referendum. 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The Labour party, too, will not rule out a second referendum. The Labour party, too, will not rule out a second referendum. The Labour party, too, will not rule out a second referendum.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): First chlorinated chicken, then hormone-pumped beef, and now a trade war. Are those really a price worth paying to keep holding hands with Trump? We should be holding him to account.

The Prime Minister: That is certainly what we intend to put in place. We will have the details of the implementation period confirmed fairly soon, but we are clear that we need to be able to sign those trade agreements during that implementation period.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Are there any circumstances in which, following the transition period, we would make a financial contribution to the European budget in order to have access to any markets?

The Prime Minister: No. One of the key elements of the first stage of negotiations was the financial settlement, and the details of that were set out in the joint report we published in December. We have said that if we chose to be a member of any agencies, such as on the security front—I have cited Europol in the past—we would of course expect to pay some costs of membership of those agencies, but we have agreed that financial settlement with the European Union.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): In her message to the European Union, the Prime Minister rightly said that we have a shared interest with it in getting this right. Does she agree that the 498 MPs who gave her the mandate to trigger article 50 have a shared interest in putting the national interest first?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As well as Parliament voting overwhelmingly to give people the referendum, it also voted overwhelmingly to trigger article 50, and every Member of this House should be behind the Government as we do what we are doing, which is delivering on that.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What assessment have the Prime Minister and her colleague, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, made of mitigating the impact of leaving the customs union on the creative industries, which are so important to my constituency?

The Prime Minister: I referred to the creative industries in my speech, and particularly to broadcasting, and the arrangements that we want for the future.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) about voters in the north. The voters in our coastal communities were even more supportive of Brexit, and the memories of the original negotiations when the fishing industry was sold out linger on, which is one of the reasons for the heavy vote to leave. My right hon. Friend speaks about the fairer allocations for the UK fishing industry in the future.

The Prime Minister: Yes. I am well aware of the concern in many fishing communities about the common fisheries policy, and as I said in my speech and repeated in my statement, we will make absolutely sure that we see fairer allocations for the UK fishing industry in the future.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I support the Prime Minister’s objectives for Northern Ireland, but given the absence of a customs union, will she give us more...
detail about what will happen to the hundreds of lorries that go each day from Dún Laoghaire in Ireland to Holyhead, from Larne in Northern Ireland to Stranraer in Scotland, and from Belfast to Liverpool, because that is still not clear to the businesses running those operations?

The Prime Minister: It is precisely because the movement is not just between Northern Ireland and Ireland, but between Ireland and other parts of the United Kingdom, that we believe the right way to approach this is to find a solution in our relationship with the European Union overall. That is precisely why it was right for me to say that we did not accept the European Commission’s proposal, which would have meant a border down the Irish sea.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) has rather stolen my thunder, but I would still like to press the Prime Minister on the fishing question. Once we get our fishing waters back, as I understand we will, will it be our sovereign Government who decide exactly who fishes in our waters?

The Prime Minister: Yes, we will be an independent member of the body that negotiates and discusses access to waters, and it will be this Government who determine our fisheries policy.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): On 24 January 2017, the Brexit Secretary assured us that we were going to get “a comprehensive free trade agreement and a comprehensive customs agreement that will deliver the exact same benefits as we have”.[Official Report, 24 January 2017; Vol. 620, c. 169.] It is clear from the Prime Minister’s speech last week and her statement today that that promise has been broken, unless she has invented some kind of Schrödinger’s customs union that we can be in and out of at the same time. Why should anyone else in the world trust this Government to negotiate trade deals in good faith when this Parliament cannot even trust assurances made by her Secretary of State at the Dispatch Box?

The Prime Minister: We will indeed be negotiating a comprehensive free trade agreement. That is the economic partnership that I set out in my speech. Within that, we will have a comprehensive customs arrangement that will enable us to continue to trade with the European Union on as tariff-free and frictionless a basis as possible.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I welcome the subtle and detailed approach to Brexit that the Prime Minister laid out in her speech. As she well knows, the issue of immigration was crucial in seats such as mine. Can she remind hon. Members that, as we leave the European Union and as freedom of movement ends, it will fall to this House to draw up our immigration policy in the future?

The Prime Minister: I can absolutely confirm to my hon. Friend that it will be for Parliament to decide what our immigration policy is for the future.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Vauxhall motors in my constituency is fighting for survival, and we desperately need future trading arrangements in the automotive sector to be no less favourable than they are now. Can the Prime Minister give a guarantee on that today?

The Prime Minister: I set out very clearly in my speech on Friday why I separated goods trade from other areas of trade with the European Union. I have also set out how we can ensure that we maintain the integrated supply chains that are currently so important to industries such as the automotive industry.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): We read in the Financial Times today that the United States “is offering Britain a worse ‘Open Skies’ deal” than the one we currently have as an EU member. Is that not a precursor to the hundreds of deals that the UK will have to negotiate once we leave the EU?

The Prime Minister: No. We are discussing with a number of countries around the world how we can improve our trade arrangements with them even before we have left the EU and how we can get into the position of having a free trade agreement with those countries.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Following the Prime Minister’s speech on Friday, she was asked by a journalist, “Is Brexit worth it?” She failed to give a direct answer; will she answer today? Is Brexit worth it: yes or no?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Prime Minister finds herself between a rock and a hard place—or perhaps between two brick walls—when she talks about not agreeing with any of the three trade scenarios put forward in the Government analysis. She has plans for a bespoke deal that will not be any of those scenarios, so does she expect GDP to be hit or to increase in her bespoke scenario, and by how much?

The Prime Minister: We have said all along that we are looking for a bespoke trade deal with the European Union. We have said all along that that will recognise the integrated nature of the UK’s markets with the EU’s markets at the moment, but also that we will be able to continue to trade around the rest of the world. As for growth, I am pleased to say that growth has actually been up, in recent figures.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I think the Prime Minister has acknowledged that there will be costs to this process, but most people ask this reasonable question when incurring a cost: “How much?” The Government have made some projections, so if we randomly say that there will be a 4.8% cut to GDP, will she explain how much that would mean for every man, woman and child in this country?
The Prime Minister: As I said in answer to one of the hon. Gentleman’s hon. Friends earlier, the analysis that was set out did not include an analysis of the sort of trade deal that we are looking to negotiate with the European Union.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for speaking to President Trump about his outrageous desire to slap punitive tariffs on UK steel and aluminium. What did he say, and what will she do, working without the EU27, both now and in the future, to ensure that such protectionism does not prosper in this world?

The Prime Minister: I was pleased to have the opportunity to raise the issue with President Trump yesterday. Of course, as current members of the EU, we continue to discuss with the EU what approach is being taken in relation to steel, but when we are outside the European Union, we want to continue to be a country that promotes free trade but recognises the overcapacity in steel at the moment. My response is clear: as I said at the G20, and as the G20 has actually adopted, we need a multilateral approach to deal with that overcapacity, and that is what we will continue to promote.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): In the light of the US President’s move to impose tariffs on steel and aluminium imports, will the Prime Minister rethink her strategy for a free trade deal with the US following Brexit? Will she act now to ensure that our steel industry is not plunged into crisis once more?

The Prime Minister: This Government have taken a number of steps over recent years to help support the steel industry. As I have said, I have raised the issue with President Trump, and we continue to discuss it within the European Union. There is this issue of overcapacity in the steel market around the world, which is why the issue has been raised at the G20. Bringing China into discussions around this is an important element of that, and I continue to believe, as I just said to the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), that the right way to approach the issue is to deal with it on a multilateral basis.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): If the Prime Minister is really so confident about getting a multi-layered, customs-type arrangement—the cherry-picked deal that she is looking for—will she explain the purpose of the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill?

The Prime Minister: That particular Bill is, of course, a contingency Bill. Members on both sides of the House ask us to ensure that we make contingency arrangements for every scenario, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Thirty-nine bottles of Scottish whisky are exported abroad every second. As the seconds tick by until our departure, can the whisky industry look forward to the same benefits as now, or will it be in a worse position?

The Prime Minister: I believe that the Scotch whisky industry will be in a better position when we are able to have trade deals with countries across the rest of the world. I was very pleased to take a representative of the Scotch Whisky Association with me on my recent trip to China, which is a huge market that could open up to Scotch whisky.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The UK already has some of the most unbalanced regional growth of any country in Europe, and the Prime Minister’s own Brexit analysis suggests that any deviation from the benefits of the single market and the customs union will only exacerbate that problem. Does she not agree that that is a dereliction of duty and that she should undertake to ensure there is no detriment to the nations and regions of the UK as a result of exiting the European Union?

The Prime Minister: Not only will we ensure that we have an exit from the European Union that works for the whole United Kingdom, but as I said on the steps of No. 10 when I first became PM, we want a country that works for everyone, which means every part of the United Kingdom. This is a Government who, through our industrial strategy and our economic policy, are ensuring that we will see growth and prosperity in every part of the United Kingdom.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The Prime Minister said today that no one should doubt our commitment to the entirety of the joint report published in December. With regard to Ireland, paragraph 47 of the joint report stated: “The two Parties have carried out a mapping exercise, which shows that North-South cooperation relies to a significant extent on a common European Union legal and policy framework.” Will she commit to publishing that mapping exercise?

The Prime Minister: We have done a number of pieces of work in relation to the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, looking at the institutions and the structures that currently exist. I said in my Lancaster House speech that, as and when we are able to do so, we will talk about the next stage of our negotiations. We stand by the joint report, and I set out on Friday more detail of the proposals that will meet exactly what was in that report in relation to the border.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Prime Minister for her courage and fortitude in standing firm. The Republic of Ireland and the EU have made suggestions for a border within the customs union. The people of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have voted to leave the EU and the customs union in March 2019, so can the Prime Minister confirm that, should the Republic of Ireland and the EU refuse to make an agreement, it will be the EU, and not the UK of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, who will be responsible for hard border controls?

The Prime Minister: We are, of course, clear that we will ensure that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, but we should approach it by saying that this is something for us to discuss with the European Commission and the Irish Government, because it is in all our interests to ensure there is no
hard border. It is also in the interests of the Irish Government to ensure there is no border down the Irish sea, given the extent of trade between the rest of the United Kingdom and Ireland. It is for all of us to work together on this.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I have listened to the answers today, and I respectfully suggest to the Prime Minister that the policy of vague sloganising and keeping her fingers crossed that everything will be all right is simply insufficient. Will she confirm that no deal we get from the proposed solutions she has identified will be more advantageous, financially or economically, than our current position?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman talks about vagueness and lack of clarity. Last year, we published 14 separate papers setting out the UK Government’s proposals on a number of aspects of our future relationship and on our withdrawal from the European Union. We have been making the running in setting out our proposals —through the Lancaster House speech, through the article 50 letter, through those papers published in the summer and through the Florence speech, the Munich speech, and now the Mansion House speech. We wait to hear the response from the European Union, but I am optimistic that we are going to get a deal that works for the UK. I am optimistic about this country because of the actions being taken by this Government.

5.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on planning reforms that will help to get our country building and deliver the right homes, in the right places, of the right quality—it cannot happen soon enough. An entire generation are the victims of a housing crisis as prices and rents race ahead of supply. In 2017, the average house price in England was nearly eight times the average income, and families in their early 30s are half as likely as their parents to own their home. This does not just hold these people back—it holds our country back. For young people in this country, it is, frankly, disheartening, when they do not see that their hard work is being rewarded, and they see the dream of a home of their own, which is something our parents took for granted, remaining just that—a dream. In those circumstances, it is hard for people to feel that they have a stake in society, and we all lose out when that happens.

That is why this Government have taken action on all fronts to turn this situation around, and those efforts are starting to bear fruit. We inherited a situation in 2010 in which annual house building had fallen to its lowest level in peacetime. Since then, we have delivered more than 1 million homes, and last year saw an increase in housing supply in England of over 217,000 new homes. That is the biggest increase in annual housing supply in all but one of the past 30 years, with planning permissions on a high and set to boost these numbers even further.

We have helped hundreds of thousands of people on to the housing ladder through Help to Buy. We are working to encourage landlords to offer longer tenancies and promoting more homes for rent on a family-friendly basis, with three-year tenancies in our build-to-rent schemes. We are cracking down on rogue landlords and the abuse of leaseholds, and we are taking steps to make renting fairer and to tackle homelessness through earlier intervention. We have launched a new, more assertive national housing agency, Homes England. We have launched an independent review, led by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), into the gap between planning permissions granted and homes actually built. We are putting billions into the affordable homes programme, and we are delivering essential infrastructure through the new housing infrastructure fund.

We know, however, that there is still a lot more to do to deliver 300,000 homes a year in England by the middle of the next decade. Of course, planning is an important part of that journey, and today we are taking the crucial next steps with the launch of consultations on the revised national planning policy framework and on the reform of developer contributions. These are measures that set out a bold, comprehensive approach for building more homes, more quickly, in the places where people actually want to live—homes that are high quality and well designed that people are proud to live in and proud to live next door to and that are at the heart of strong, thriving communities. There will be much clearer expectations on local authorities and
developers to deliver their commitment to unlock land, fulfill planning permissions, provide essential infrastructure, and turn those dreams of a decent, secure, affordable home into reality.

The revised NPPF implements around 80 reforms that we announced last year and retains an emphasis on development that is both sustainable and locally led, but it also involves a number of significant changes. For the first time, all local authorities will be expected to assess housing need using the same methodology—that is a big improvement on the current situation in which different councils calculate housing need in different ways, wasting time and taxpayers’ money. A standardised approach will establish a level playing field and give us a much clearer, more transparent understanding of the challenge we face. But perhaps one of the biggest shifts is a change in culture towards a focus on outcomes achieved—the number of homes delivered in an area—rather than on processes such as planning permissions. As it becomes easier to make plans more streamlined and strategic, this culture change will encourage local authorities to work together to meet their communities’ needs.

We are also confirming the important protections of neighbourhood plans—plans that are produced by local communities—which we introduced in December 2016 to guard against speculative applications. And we are going further, beyond the reforms we previously consulted on. We are giving local authorities the tools to make the most of existing developed land, with an even stronger drive for increasing density, particularly in areas where housing need is high. We will support those councils that wish to build upwards, but not at the expense of quality—high design standards that communities are happy to embrace will remain a priority.

The reforms also include more flexibility to develop brownfield land in the green belt to meet affordable housing need with no harm to the openness of the green belt. Even the mention of the words “green belt” may cause some concern, but let me assure right hon. and hon. Members that this is about building homes on sites that have previously been developed, not about compromising in any way existing protections that govern the green belt. Our green spaces are precious and deserve our protection, which is why the Government are also delivering today on our manifesto commitment to give stronger protection to ancient woodland, which demonstrates that we do not have to choose between improving the environment and delivering the homes we need—we can do both.

We are raising the bar across the board. We are protecting our natural world and making local authorities more ambitious and accountable so that places such as London no longer deliver far fewer homes than they need. In areas such as the capital, where demand and affordability are going in different directions, it is especially important that there should be less talk and more action—that is more strategic and more realistic about housing need, with stronger leadership to bring people together across sectors and boundaries.

That said, the issue is not all about local government. Developers must also step up to help us to continue to close the gap between planning permissions granted and homes built. In doing so, it is vital that developers know what contributions they are expected to make towards affordable housing and essential infrastructure, and that local authorities can hold them to account. However, we all know of instances of developers making such promises but later claiming that they cannot afford them. In truth, the current complex and uncertain system of developer contributions makes it too easy for them to do just that, and it puts off new entrants to the market. That is not good enough, which is why we propose major reforms to developer contributions.

As part of our reforms, areas will be able to agree a five-year land supply position for a year, reducing the need for costly planning appeals involving speculative applications. I also recognise that swift and fair decisions are important at appeal, so I will shortly announce an end-to-end review of the planning appeal inquiries process with the aim of seeing what needs to be done to halve the time for an inquiry to conclude, while ensuring that the process remains fair.

There are other areas where we are considering pushing boundaries to really boost housing supply, including a new permitted development right for building upwards to provide new homes, and by finding more effective ways of supporting farmers to diversify and support the rural economy. The strong focus throughout is on making sure that we are exploring all avenues to meet everyone’s housing needs. That could mean implementing an exception site policy to help more people on to the housing ladder; giving older people a better choice of accommodation; promoting build to rent; or encouraging local policies for affordable homes that cater for essential workers such as our nurses and police.

By giving everyone—whether they are renting or buying, in the social or private sector—a stake in our housing market, we give everyone a stake in our society. That is why I encourage right hon. and hon. Members, and anyone who wants to see today’s generation enjoy the same opportunities as their parents, to get involved and contribute to the consultations that we have announced today. They will run until 10 May, and I look forward to announcing the implementation of the national planning policy framework in the summer.

I am confident that the bold and ambitious measures that we are proposing will have a huge impact not just on the number of homes built but, ultimately, on people’s prospects and our prospects as a country. They will ensure that local authorities or developers can no longer be in any doubt about where they stand, what is expected of them and what they must do to help to fix our broken housing market and deliver the homes that the people of this country need and deserve. I commend this statement to the House.

5.23 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I begin by thanking the Secretary of State for early sight of his statement.

Today, once again, we have seen the Government bringing forward proposals that tinker with the planning system in yet another vain attempt to look as though they are doing something about the housing and infrastructure crisis that the country is facing, which is largely of their making. Let us be clear about the scale of the problem. Many communities up and down the country do not have the homes that they need. Since 2010, the number of rough sleepers in England has nearly trebled from 1,700 to almost 5,000 last year. The number of households living in temporary accommodation...
Lyons report almost a decade ago, with incentives for real policies to address land banking, as set out in our detail, but we know that we need something much never mind it being built?

will it take for us to see the start of a new settlement, or five garden towns and villages."

"along that corridor, there is an opportunity to build at least four new town. The Secretary of State has said that despite more than seven years in office, has barely about new towns and garden cities for many years but, the Conservative party, which has talked warm words the driving seat of spearheading new settlements, unlike garden cities and new towns, putting local councils in 21st century communities, and that is what Labour making. What we need is a radical approach to deliver something that they have any say in whatsoever. By is that planning is something that is done to them, not planning altogether, so that the general view of people today' s proposals, takes the community voice out of misguided.

The increase in permitted development, as set out in today's proposals, takes the community voice out of planning altogether, so that the general view of people is that planning is something that is done to them, not something that they have any say in whatsoever. By contrast, Labour wants to empower communities, putting them at the heart of decision making, with neighbourhood plans central to a new streamlined system of plan making. What we need is a radical approach to deliver 21st century communities, and that is what Labour would do. We would invest in a new generation of garden cities and new towns, putting local councils in the driving seat of spearheading new settlements, unlike the Conservative party, which has talked warm words about new towns and garden cities for many years but, despite more than seven years in office, has barely produced enough homes for a new street, never mind a new town. The Secretary of State has said that “along that corridor, there is an opportunity to build at least four or five garden towns and villages.”

What does he mean by “along that corridor”? How long will it take for us to see the start of a new settlement, never mind it being built?

Labour will look at the Government’s proposals in detail, but we know that we need something much bolder than what we have seen today. I am talking about real policies to address land banking, as set out in our Lyons report almost a decade ago, with incentives for timely delivery and sanctions on developers whose build-out rate is too slow. We need a reformed planning system that puts communities and brownfield first and does not bypass local people with more and more permitted development and a lack of involvement in policy making.

We also need a robust policy platform that addresses not just the quantity of new homes, but their quality, and that delivers the infrastructure they need to work as sustainable and inclusive communities. An investment programme in local authority housing is needed, so that good-quality housing can once again be provided for working people, not at the Government’s inflated “affordable” rents, but at social rents that people can afford. We will make viability assessments transparent, so that developers cannot avoid their obligations to deliver affordable housing and other community benefits.

We have a vision of a built environment for the future, not a set of outdated measures that have so spectacularly failed to deliver in the past. If the Secretary of State really wants to spearhead a housing revolution, he will need to do much better than this.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady started by saying that many communities do not have the homes that they need—I agree. I have been saying that for a long time, which is why we have been taking action on many fronts and why we have announced this action today. Let us explore what the hon. Lady meant, because she cannot ignore the huge role that the Government of which she was a part, formed by the party that she supports, played in the housing crisis facing this country.

From 1997 to 2010, the average house price rose from three and a half times average earnings to seven times such earnings. That is Labour’s legacy. Labour, more than anyone else, has created that crisis of unaffordability. When the shadow Secretary of State was Housing Minister, house building fell to its lowest level in our peace time history since the 1920s, and social housing fell by 421,000 units. We will not take any lectures from the Opposition about how to deal with a housing crisis that they helped to create. Their policies are about rent controls and the requisition of private property. They have no ideas.

The hon. Lady is right that there is an issue with resources in planning departments, but she is also wrong, because we have already dealt with that issue. Perhaps she did not notice that local authorities are able to increase their planning fees by at least 20% as long as that money is put back into their planning departments. That measure has been welcomed not just by local authorities, but throughout the industry.

The hon. Lady says that the planning process is not part of the problem, but she has clearly not been listening to what the problem is. She has not been out there talking to local authorities and developers, or finding out what communities actually think. If she had, she would know that local authorities in England are together planning for 169,000 houses a year, which is nowhere near the number that we need. We need a change in the formula, so that we get the right number of homes in the right places.

The hon. Lady talked about the importance of giving communities a greater say. That is great, because this is the first time that I have heard that she is supporting our neighbourhood planning process—thank you very much. She also talked about garden cities, towns and villages,
and she was right, so I thank her again for supporting our policy, as that is exactly what we are proposing up and down the country. Lastly, she mentioned that brownfield land must be the priority. Again, that is our policy—thank you very much for your support.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Wokingham Borough Council, the unitary authority in my area, has issued a very large number of planning permissions—well above its five-yearly amounts under the plan—but the build rate has not always been high enough. Will the Secretary of State help such local authorities through experiments to find ways of increasing the build rate, so that homes are built where they are agreed to be built, rather than granting on appeal houses elsewhere where there would not be the same infrastructure contribution and the same ability to fit in with the plan?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend raises a real and important issue, which he knows I have discussed with his local authority. The measures subject to the consultations that we are announcing today will certainly help with that problem. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset will provide further help when he reports back on the work that he is doing.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): While there is always more to do, in Scotland the SNP has led the UK on housing, delivering nearly 71,000 affordable homes since 2007—a supply of affordable housing that is a third higher per head of population than in England. Has the Secretary of State learned any lessons from the SNP Government’s successful building programme?

Sajid Javid: We have been very concerned about speed of development from planning permission to home, and the measures announced today will help with that. I also await the outcome of the independent review that has already begun. On broadband, I absolutely accept the need to make sure that all homes—existing homes, of course, and certainly all our new homes—have access to the best possible broadband. We are working very closely with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on that.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement because I know that this is not an easy area, having practised in it professionally. Recently, I sent out a survey to 12,000 households in Cirencester. They told me in large numbers that they wanted more affordable housing and, above all, more infrastructure to meet the huge development that they are about to have. What can he say about developers’ contributions to meeting my constituents’ aspirations?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He is absolutely right to raise this issue. The private sector plays a huge role in infrastructure and provision of affordable homes, especially when it carries out the so-called viability assessments. We are not happy with the way that that process has worked, and that is why we started the consultation on it. At the end of that consultation, I believe, will be an outcome where we are much more easily able to hold the developers to account and make sure that they will actually deliver what they said right at the start.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree with the Conservative leader of the Local Government Association, Gary Porter, who said this weekend: “If we want more houses, we have to build them, not plan them”, and that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government needs to “push back against” the Treasury, “or the nonsense will go on and nothing will change”?
If he does agree, why has he allowed affordable housing funding from his Ministry to be handed back to the Treasury, rather than spent on critically needed affordable homes?

Sajid Javid: I agree that to build the homes we need, we need to plan them properly, and that is what these reforms are about. The hon. Lady suggested that the Ministry handed money back. Among the underspend that she and her hon. Friends have mentioned was £65 million that was returned by the Greater London Authority because it did not spend it. That money was returned by the Mayor of London, so perhaps she wants to ask him why he returned funding.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): One of the first actions taken by the Conservatives when they returned to government in 2010 was to introduce greater planning protection for back gardens. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that there is nothing in his announcement today that will in any way undermine that or encourage garden-grabbing development?

Sajid Javid: First, may I wish my right hon. Friend a very happy birthday? I can reassure her that what we have set out today is very much focused on brownfield first, and the protections we have set out in the past for gardens remain in place.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Before the Government go ahead with new garden towns between Oxford and Cambridge, will they commit today to a full public consultation on both the corridor and the route for the Oxford-to-Cambridge expressway?

Sajid Javid: What was last said on that, by the Chancellor at the Budget, has not changed. We have accepted the recommendation of the National Infrastructure Commission of up to five new garden towns and villages along the corridor. We have not yet decided exactly how that will be done or where they will be. Obviously, the placement of the infrastructure that goes alongside that is important, and I can reassure the hon. Lady that as we work on that, Parliament will be involved.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I welcome the Office for National Statistics methodology for determining housing need, as originally set out in the Local Plans Expert Group, of which I was a member. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether there have been any changes between the original formula and the formula that will now go into guidance?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for the work he has done, particularly on density and building upwards. We have set out the detail on permitted development rights today, and we hope to bring that forward as soon as possible.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I welcome the push for simplification and increased transparency on viability assessments, but it is hard to see what they will do for London boroughs such as Greenwich, where the publication of such assessments is already mandatory. At the heart of this matter is the issue of developer returns. Given the scale of the housing crisis in London, does the Secretary of State really think it is acceptable that developers use viability assessments to drive down levels of affordable housing simply because to do otherwise would limit their profits to below 20%?

Sajid Javid: I do not think it is acceptable that developers do not meet the commitments they set out at the start. Particularly in London, we have seen too many examples of where a particular percentage of a development was set out for affordable housing and that was not met, based on the way in which the assessment process currently works. That is why I hope the hon. Gentleman will support the process we have set out today, which will have greater standardisation and much more transparency.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): We need more housing, and neighbourhood planning has produced more houses than expected. Does my right hon. Friend agree that speculative development can undermine democratically agreed neighbourhood plans, and will his proposals ensure that the neighbourhood plans are upheld?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend should be reassured that what we have set out today gives greater strength to neighbourhood plans. He makes a very important point. We have found with neighbourhood plans that when we give communities a bigger say, in many cases they actually accept even more development. So far, we have found that that is, on average, about 10% more development.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): In 1909, Winston Churchill spoke in favour of a land value tax, saying that landlords sit on it and basically do nothing while public money is used to enhance an area and the land value increases. Today, developers are again sitting on almost 1 million housing plots and drawing rewards
for being idle, while young people face a lifetime of housing insecurity and high prices. Is it not time for the Government to look again at the benefits of land value taxation?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady may be interested in the consultation on developer contributions that we have set out today. I am sure she will agree that developer contributions are a type of tax on developers, because they are expected to provide infrastructure or affordable housing, and in some cases both. If she is really interested in this issue, I urge her to look at that consultation.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer to our right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan), which was that councils will be able to amend green-belt boundaries only if they can prove that they have fully explored every other reasonable option for building the homes that their community needs. Will he, however, confirm that the new national planning policy framework goes even further, explicitly saying that housing need does not trump issues such as areas of outstanding natural beauty, sites of special scientific interest and the green belt, so councils cannot be forced to amend their green-belt boundaries by the Planning Inspectorate in those circumstances if they do not wish to do so and they have explored every other option?

Sajid Javid: The assurance I can give my hon. Friend is that what we have set out today makes it absolutely clear—even clearer than before—that brownfields should be the absolute priority, and any council wanting to look beyond brownfield must demonstrate that it has looked at all other reasonable opportunities, but this puts councils in control of how exactly they meet their need. When my hon. Friend has the opportunity and time to go through this in more detail, I hope he will be even more reassured.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Is it not the case that, in high-demand, high-price areas such as Manchester city centre, the measure of affordability is not really affordable for many local residents—that is why we have our own assessment of what affordability is in Manchester—and that to deliver truly affordable homes, we need more state intervention and more Government money, and we need to allow local government to borrow in order to build?

Sajid Javid: I have to disagree with the hon. Lady in that this is not all about more Government money. First, Government money for affordable housing has increased: we increased the budget last year from £7 billion to £9 billion. Government money of course has a role to play, but I hope she will agree that the only way to get houses that are truly affordable in this country—whether in Manchester or elsewhere—is to increase supply and make sure that it is increased at a sustainable level.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s confirmation to our right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) that these reforms will not diminish the national policy protection for back gardens. Perhaps he will remind the Mayor of London that any amendments he proposes to the London plan are subject to that national policy.

Sajid Javid: I will certainly be reminding the Mayor of London of a number of things, especially as he recently published his draft London plan, which I do not think is ambitious enough. I do not think it is realistic, so I will take the opportunity when I discuss it with him to also remind him of my hon. Friend’s point.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State accept that one way to provide affordable housing is through local authorities? They are not asking for more grants; they are just asking to be able to borrow more where they have the asset base, to allow them to solve the problem of affordability in their areas. Does he agree with that?

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Local authorities have an important role to play, and not just in the planning system. We welcome local authorities wanting to develop more council houses, which is one reason why in the recent Budget the Chancellor increased local authorities’ ability to borrow by £1 billion.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. In the context of his reforms, can he reassure residents in Halesowen of the absolute continuation of protection for the green belt in his proposals, in particular around “exceptional circumstances”? Local authority planners have often used it in a loose way to justify changes to green belt boundaries. Does he agree that we need a rigorous way of defining what we mean by exceptional circumstances when it comes to redefining the green belt?

Sajid Javid: I can give my hon. Friend some reassurances on that. We have been clear and have set out, I think for the first time, all the hurdles that need to be cleared to meet the definition of exceptional circumstances. Brownfield is an absolute priority, and we have talked about the importance of density and making sure that neighbouring authorities have been talked to, with a statement of common ground. I can give my hon. Friend an assurance that the green belt retains maximum protection.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): For two years, the Secretary of State has failed to determine the future of the Earl’s Court development, one of the biggest in the UK. The choice is between demolishing 750 council homes and building luxury homes with only 10% so-called affordable and no new social housing, and letting the existing residents keep their homes and develop the rest of the site for new social homes. It should not be that difficult a choice, so could we have some action and not just words?

Sajid Javid: I cannot comment on that particular planning proposal—it is a live proposal—but the hon. Gentleman should reflect. If he truly supports more homes and developments in London, perhaps he should have a chat with the leader of his party and ask why they intimidate Labour leaders who want to increase the number of homes in their areas.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is the Secretary of State satisfied with the balance of power between developer and purchaser when new builds turn out to be seriously defective?
Sajid Javid: No, I am not satisfied, which is one reason why the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler) is conducting a review of the house buying process.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I welcome the review of development controls, because at the moment far too many developers get away with making no contribution at all. May I ask the Secretary of State about land banking? He will be familiar from his days in Bristol with Oldbury Court estate in my constituency. An owner in the Channel Islands has been sitting on the site for 10 years, renewing planning permission but seemingly refusing to develop it. What can we do to ensure that developers build houses on the brownfield sites they own?

Sajid Javid: I empathise very much with the issue that the hon. Lady has raised. Lady has raised. It is an issue in many local areas, not just Bristol. That is why, given the concern that we all share across the House, we have the independent review being undertaken by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset. I do not want to pre-empt it, but I can assure her that it is a serious review and will lead to serious action.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): With specific reference to the Greater Manchester spatial framework, can my right hon. Friend reiterate the protections that are in place for the green belt and the need to pursue a vigorous brownfield-first policy? Will he also give further consideration to a county-based calculation of housing need?

Sajid Javid: When it comes to housing need, the approach that we plan to take is what we have set out today, but given that this is a draft consultation, I am happy to listen to any representations from my hon. Friend. I can also give him an assurance that the existing green-belt protections remain in place. In fact, when it comes to environmental protections we have gone even further in the draft NPPF. For example, the protection that we have given to ancient woodland is the highest ever.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Excuse me, Mr Speaker; I have a problem with my voice tonight. Can the Secretary of State assure residents that they will have a meaningful say in development? He will know that we have had problems in Coventry in the Kings Hill estate, Cromwell Lane and Westwood Heath. I have already met him about that, and I hope for a date to meet his colleague. Can he give us an assurance that residents will have a stronger say and that their views will be taken into consideration?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will understand if I do not talk about any particular planning application that is going through the process, but I can give him an assurance on local people and communities having a say. The consultations that we have set out today strengthen that, and one of the best ways for a local community to play a part is also to adopt neighbourhood plans.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): May I say a special thank you to the Secretary of State for the mention of ancient woodland today and the protections given to it? It is a very precious habitat. I wholeheartedly support the ambition to deliver more homes. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is quite possible to have more houses but at the same time to look after the precious environment?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I very much agree with my hon. Friend. There is no need to trade-off between the two. We have shown through the consultations today that it is absolutely possible both to protect our environment and to deliver the homes that this country needs.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I bring excellent news for the Secretary of State from the city of Nottingham. We are ready to build the houses we need to; we just need him to remove the cap on Nottingham City Council’s ability to borrow in order to do so. When will the cap be removed?

Sajid Javid: The £1 billion increase that the Chancellor set out at the last Budget will be from 2019, but if Nottingham has particular plans and wants to consider approaching us for a housing deal, it should do that.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I welcome today’s statement, in particular the commitment to protecting the green belt. Can my right hon. Friend provide reassurance to my constituents, particularly in areas where significant development may be planned, that he will take steps to ensure that developers pay their share towards necessary infrastructure improvements, so that all local residents can benefit?

Sajid Javid: I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. One of the two consultations today is specifically about developer contributions—something that has not been looked at for years and years. It will deal with the issue of where, particularly with large developments, certain promises are made at the start that are never kept. That is unacceptable, and we are going to take action.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): When I tell my constituents in New Ferry that the Secretary of State wants less talk and more action, they will not know whether to laugh or cry. We have been trying to build homes in New Ferry since the terrible blast last year, and we have had little action from the Government. That is why the Metro Mayor for Liverpool, Steve Rotheram, and I wrote to the Secretary of State on 13 February asking him to do more. He has not replied. What on earth is going on?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady may be aware of this—if she is not, I am sure it will be welcome news—but Homes England is discussing with her local authority exactly how it could help. I hope that is something she supports.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that Rugby is playing its part in delivering the homes the country needs from his visit to Houlton, a site of 6,200 new homes, planned and structured on a brownfield site. That is happening because Rugby has always placed a high priority on plan making, with the current plan under examination. Can he confirm that the new standardised approach to assessing housing need will not require any further changes?
Sajid Javid: First, I have been very impressed by Rugby’s approach. In many ways, it leads the way in showing what can be done to get the most out of previously developed land. I can confirm that the new approach to how housing need is assessed will apply to local authorities as they continue to develop plans. In other words, if they already have a plan in place it will not make any difference to them.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): My constituency is plagued with rogue landlords who are buying up residential homes, turning them into homes for multiple occupation, often fuelled by milking the housing benefit budget, and pricing local people out of the market. The problem is a lack of ability to enforce planning regulations. As rogue landlords use permitted development, will the Secretary of State just referred to a consultation. Does he respond to the consultation.

Sajid Javid: The draft reforms will give extra protection to local authorities that temporarily fall below their five-year land supply because they have plans for larger developments that have yet to come online. That case was made to me by a number of people during the consultation. It is a sensible case and it will help in exactly the kind of circumstances my hon. Friend outlines.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): There are some laudable aims in the Secretary of State’s statement today, but I fear they will not succeed because we are still relying on the same cabal of developers who brought us the leasehold scandal and whose profits have gone up nearly 400% in the past five years. Surely the answer is to give more powers and finances to local authorities and, instead of setting an arbitrary figure centrally, to work with each individual council to see what their plans and borrowing capacity can actually be?

Sajid Javid: What the hon. Gentleman highlights, I think, is the need for more competition in the market: having more people involved and not just some large developers who tend to dominate the market in some areas. I therefore hope he will welcome the measures in the draft planning code to encourage smaller builders and the support we provide through the home building fund.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The housing demand in northern Lincolnshire is very different from that in London and the south-east. May I urge the Secretary of State to always be mindful of that and not put local planning authorities in a straitjacket of guidelines? Will he also ensure that the guidance is sufficient, so that local authorities do not grant planning permission without the necessary infrastructure and access to essential services that new housing developments need?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. There are regional housing markets—the London market is very different from housing markets in other parts of the country—so he is right to highlight that point. On infrastructure, it is very important that the local authority plans for the right infrastructure. That means help from developer contributions, but also from the Government. That is why I hope he welcomes the housing infrastructure fund.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) rose—

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: What a choice between two illustrious denizens of the House. I call Mr Andrew Selous.

Andrew Selous: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. Houghton Regis North 1 is a 5,000-house development in my constituency for which all planning permissions
have already been granted. My concern is that I am told that not a single person will collect keys on that large site until early 2020 because of the time it will take to put in electricity and other utilities. My constituents need those houses now. They cannot wait that long and they cannot wait for the Letwin review. What can the Government do to help to get those utilities in more quickly, so that we build the houses we desperately need?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend highlights the need for more cross-government work to ensure better co-ordination on issues such as utilities to make sure that all Departments are delivering. I am working with my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary and his colleagues to make sure that utilities are put in at the right time and do not hold up development.

Robert Courts: In rural areas such as west Oxfordshire, it is absolutely essential that, when new houses are built, infrastructure is built to accompany them. Will the Secretary of State please confirm that the intention of the NPPF revision is that developers are not only made to pay for that infrastructure, but that it will be delivered in advance of, or at the very least at the same time as, the houses are being built—not long afterwards, or, worse, not at all?

Sajid Javid: There is obviously a role for Departments to play with regard to strategic infrastructure—for example, the housing deal in Oxfordshire helps to provide some of the strategic infrastructure—but my hon. Friend is absolutely right about the role that developers must play in providing infrastructure. Many do not meet those obligations, which is why we set out the consultation on developer contributions. I hope he will contribute to it.

Points of Order

6.8 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Thursday 1 March, in an oral statement on the Leveson inquiry, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport said:

“Sir Brian, whom I thank for his service, agrees that the inquiry should not proceed under the current terms of reference”—[Official Report, 1 March 2018; Vol. 636, c. 966.]

Is it in order for the Secretary of State to describe Sir Brian as agreeing with the Government when his actual words, in a letter to the Department on 23 January, were that he “fundamentally disagrees” with the Government’s position? Furthermore, the Government acknowledged his view in further correspondence that was released hours after that statement was made.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order and for her characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of it. I understand that she has also notified the Secretary of State. The contents of a ministerial statement are the responsibility of the Minister. If the Secretary of State feels that he has been in any way inaccurate in his description of Sir Brian Leveson’s views, I have no doubt that he will take steps to put the record straight. He is not obliged to say anything here, although he can if he so wishes.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock) rose—

Mr Speaker: I very clearly and carefully described my position and Sir Brian’s. Now that his letter is in the public domain, I think it is all very straightforward.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am sorry, but I was in here and listened very carefully, and I—and, I think, the majority of Members of this House—certainly got the very distinct impression that Sir Brian Leveson was agreeing with the Secretary of State, whereas one could only describe his reaction to having been described in such a way as incandescent fury. In future, would it not be helpful if, when a Secretary of State makes a statement of this nature—particularly one citing another person and praying them in aid—he published that person’s correspondence at exactly the same point as making the statement?
Mr Speaker: That certainly could be helpful. The Secretary of State's words are a matter for him. It is always very important, as a matter of both principle and prudence, faithfully to reflect the views of anybody whom one seeks to quote; as a matter of principle, because that is ethically right, and as a matter of prudence, because to put it bluntly—I am speaking hypothetically—if one did not, it might come back to bite one. We will leave that there for now.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab) rose—

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: A very difficult south London choice for me. I was notified by the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) first, so I will take a point of order from him.

Chuka Umunna: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Over the last few years, there have been several major water leaks and burst water mains causing severe disruption to my constituents, meaning that they cannot wash, cook and do the basic things that we take for granted in everyday life. Yesterday, over 20,000 homes across London, and indeed many others across the rest of the country, were left without water.

My constituency is served by Thames Water. This is the worst incident of its type and it is totally unacceptable. Although the snows, the freeze and the thaw have posed huge challenges, Ofgat said this afternoon that these companies have fallen far short in forward planning and giving the right support and communication to people. I am absolutely astounded, given the practical implications of this, that no Minister has come to the Dispatch Box today to explain what the Government are doing, or will do, to support people who have been going through hell over the last couple of days. At the very least, one would have thought that there would be some kind of public inquiry. People will be interested to know whether they will get compensation for what has happened. Can you assist me, Mr Speaker, by advising me how we might get a Minister to the Dispatch Box to explain what they are doing to address this serious situation?

Mr Speaker: Would the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) like to come in at this point?

Helen Hayes: Further to the point of order raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna), who is my constituency neighbour, Mr Speaker. Thousands of my constituents have been without water over the weekend, some since last Thursday. During that time, they have been unable to contact Thames Water by telephone or through the website, and they have not received any information on when supply will be restored or how to obtain bottled water. The BBC reported this morning that a hospital had to contact the water company by Twitter to request emergency supplies of water. There has been no clear protocol for ensuring that residents who are not able to collect water in person have access to clean and safe drinking water.

There are similar reports from across the country, including one that I received personally this evening from the water industry that up to 100,000 residents in Birmingham are at imminent risk of being without water as the thaw spreads. This is a national crisis in our water industry, which, it is clear, is not fit for purpose. I welcome your advice, Mr Speaker, on how we can secure the intervention and leadership that we need from the Government to get us through this crisis, and to ensure that we have a water industry that is fit for purpose.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Members for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) and for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for their points of order, which appertain to their constituencies, but which they have made clear are of national salience. Today was a very difficult day, in that we had two Government statements that were likely to be well subscribed, and a Second Reading is to follow, but there are tried and tested mechanisms for seeking to bring to the House's attention matters that are thought to be of some urgency. If the matters continue to be of some urgency, it is open to Members to seek to bring those matters to the House on subsequent days.

I should say to the hon. Member for Streatham that until 25 years ago, I lived in his constituency, although he was not at that point its distinguished representative, and I drove through it yesterday in the course of a rather unhappy journey in my car back from Brighton, where I had been attending a football match with my son. The reason for my unhappiness will be well known to the hon. Gentleman, as I hail originally from north London. I did see a rather large concentration of very dirty water in a road at one point. That was obviously rather a sad contrast with the unavailability of a proper water supply to residents of his constituency, so this is a real and pressing concern. The ingenuity of both hon. Members is such that I think they will find their own salvation before too long.

BILL PRESENTED

RIVERS AUTHORITIES AND LAND DRAINAGE BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

David Warburton, supported by Neil Parish, Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger, James Heappey and Mr Marcus Fysh, presented a Bill to make provision about rivers authorities; to make provision about the expenses of internal drainage boards; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March, and to be printed (Bill 172) with explanatory notes (Bill 172-EN).
Data Protection Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

6.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This House has a noble track record of working with rather than against technology. Whether it was the Electric Lighting Act 1882, which paved the way for electricity in the 19th century, or the Television Act 1954, which opened up our airwaves to commercial TV broadcasters in the 20th century, we have always helped pioneered to overcome obstacles and to use technology to make life better. The Data Protection Bill will do this, too. It will give people more power and control over their online lives while supporting innovation and entrepreneurship in the digital age, helping to make Britain fit for the future.

The Bill will deliver real benefits across the country, helping our businesses to compete and trade abroad. Strong data protection laws give consumers confidence in the products and services that they buy, and that is good for business, not bad. The Bill provides a full data protection framework as we leave the EU, consistent with the general data protection regulation in EU law. In October, the House debated how our data protection landscape will look after we leave the EU. Members on both sides agreed that the unhindered flow of data between the UK and the EU is vital and in the interests of both. Through today’s Bill, we can make that a reality.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his opening remarks about the importance of the House supporting technology. He will know that data drives our economy and society in ways that people can find difficult to follow. The internet of things will increase exponentially the data trail we all leave, but the digital charter suggests only that private companies follow best practice. Does he not recognise the importance of data rights? Why is he not bringing forward a Bill of data rights?

Matt Hancock: I absolutely do, and the Bill does bring forward the right to the protection of personal data, as I will set out. It is incredibly important to ensure that such rights keep pace with the sort of modern technologies that the hon. Lady—she is extremely well informed on these topics—refers to, such as the internet of things. The Bill will directly address the issue she raises by strengthening citizens’ rights in this new digital era, and I will detail the new rights later.

As digital becomes default in our society, people are trusting businesses and public services with more personal and sensitive data than ever before, including through their personal use of the internet and the internet of things, yet without trust that that data will be properly handled, the digital economy simply cannot succeed. Trust underpins a strong economy, and trust in data underpins a strong digital economy. The Bill will strengthen trust in the use of data by setting new standards for protecting data while giving new rights to remove or delete it. Everyone will have the right to make sure that the data held about them is fair and accurate, and held in a way that aligns with rigorous principles.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Is it really accurate to say that everyone will have that right, given the immigration exemption?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. Everyone who is a British citizen will have the right to make sure that data about them is held fairly and accurately, and in alignment with rigorous principles. The hon. and learned Lady raises obliquely the point that the Bill contains important exemptions, including those to allow MPs to act on behalf of constituents as part of their casework, and to ensure that we can properly police our borders. I will come to that in more detail later. Nevertheless, at the heart of the Bill is citizens’ ability to control the data that companies and other organisations hold about them.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Further to the point made by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), will the Secretary of State explain the legal basis for the immigration exemption from the general data protection regulation?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. Exemptions from the GDPR are allowed so that necessary activities can be carried out, including that of making sure that a minority of individuals cannot abuse data protection law with the sole intent of undermining immigration controls. That is provided for in the necessary exemptions. I know that this point was debated extensively in the other place, but we firmly believe not only that it is important to ensure that we can control our borders through immigration controls, but that this is provided for in the GDPR.

Joanna Cherry: The Secretary of State says that the immigration exemption is covered by the GDPR, but is he aware of legal opinion saying that the text of parts 1 and 4 of schedule 2 does not in fact reflect the stated permissible exemptions under article 23 of the GDPR? That is independent legal opinion, not mine.

Matt Hancock: Of course, there are always legal opinions about everything, and our legal opinion is that that is consistent—that is the basis on which we are proceeding. As I am sure the vast majority of Members would agree, it is important that we control our borders.

The Bill provides new data rights, including a stronger right to be forgotten.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the element of the Bill about the right to be forgotten. I am sure that the Secretary of State is aware that the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee is carrying out an inquiry into fake news, during which this whole issue of data—who owns it, who holds it and who knows what about whom—has come under the spotlight. Can he say how the Bill might help to control that?
Matt Hancock: Yes, I can.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Before he does, will the Secretary of State give way?

Matt Hancock: Of course.

Bill Wiggin: Will the provisions apply to Wikipedia as well?

Matt Hancock: I will happily respond to both points. Under the Bill, data must be deleted unless there are legitimate grounds for retaining it. The details of what is meant by legitimate grounds will be set out in recitals and then guidance from the Information Commissioner. This is one area in which the right to be forgotten, which has been long dreamt of and thought about, is now being legislated for, and the precise details of where it applies will be set out in guidance, as the Bill states only that there need to be legitimate grounds for retaining data.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Can we be certain that this right to be forgotten will not impede freedom of speech? I am thinking of Max Mosley, of course, and the information that came out on what he said in 1961, which is relevant and pertinent to current debates. We should do nothing that limits the right of a free press.

Matt Hancock: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend about not limiting the rights of the free press. He might be aware of amendments that were made in the other place on exactly that issue and that are supported by a number of Members of this House, including, notably, some who are also supported by Max Mosley. I think that we should remove those two provisions. The ability of our press properly to scrutinise is important and should not be undermined in the ways proposed, but I will come to that in more detail later.

The right to be forgotten is an important element of making sure that data is held appropriately and when there are legitimate grounds. The Bill also allows for data portability—a person’s right to transfer their data from one provider to another.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): As the Secretary of State is describing, the Bill puts into UK law the EU’s general data protection regulation, which is the right thing to do. I am confident that he would agree that we need to ensure that our data protection rules stay in line with the EU regulation as things develop. Does it trouble him that we will have less influence over the future content of the EU’s rules once we have left it?

Matt Hancock: I agree that this is a strong set of data protection standards. We intend to stay aligned with the EU standards, not least because they are extraterritorial, which means that anyone wanting to do any business or transactions with EU citizens would have to follow them anyway. There is therefore a very strong case for alignment in this area. Indeed, we have set out that we want the Information Commissioner to remain engaged with the future development of technical standards because we expect the GDPR effectively to become a standard that is increasingly followed around the world by companies that want to engage with the EU, and because we believe that high data protection standards go hand in hand with the capability to innovate and provide for customers. The Prime Minister was, of course, clear about the detail on Friday.

Sir Edward Davey: I am afraid that the Secretary of State has not answered the question asked by the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). Is it not true that UK companies will be bound by rules that the EU will decide? Those rules will affect a huge amount of business, but we will have no influence over them after we leave the EU?

Matt Hancock: I thought I had answered the question—the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) was nodding, so I thought I had at least had a crack at it. As the Prime Minister set out on Friday, and as we set out for the first time last August, we will seek, through the Information Commissioner’s Office, to remain engaged in those technical discussions about the future of the rules. As was proposed in the Conservative party manifesto, the Bill also gives young people the right to have data about them removed once they are 18 years old.

The second element is transparency, which is absolutely vital. All citizens should be able to know what is happening to their data and how it is being used. The Bill requires data controllers to give people information about who controls data, the purpose of processing it, and how long it will be stored. That is especially crucial in a world in which emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence are making increasingly important ethical decisions. The Bill therefore provides powers for the restriction of automated decision making and safeguards for those whose data is used. Our new centre for data ethics and innovation will advise on those safeguards, so that we can promote innovation and respond quickly to changes in technology with clear and transparent guidelines that are based on openness and consent.

The third principle is security. The Bill enhances requirements relating to the security of data and strengthens enforcement for those who do not comply. Data security and innovation go hand in hand, and this move will benefit customers and all responsible businesses. The Data Protection Act 1998 has served us well and placed the UK at the forefront of global data protection standards, but the world has changed since 1998, and the Bill updates the position to make our laws fit for purpose in an increasingly digital economy and society. It modernises many of the offences under the Act and creates new offences to help us to deal with emerging challenges.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is being very generous in taking interventions. He has probably heard from the National Association of Local Councils, which represents parish and town councils. It has asked that an external data protection officer will not have to be appointed at every council level. There would be a cost of some £3.5 million to the smallest but most relevant authorities, so will the Secretary of State be sympathetic to its request for relief from that onerous responsibility?

Matt Hancock: I have received representations not only from the National Association of Local Councils, but from the Suffolk Association of Local Councils and many of my own parish councils—including Moulton Parish Council—which do an admirable job in telling me about the pressures facing parish councils throughout the country. I pay tribute to them for their efforts, and for the length of their representations to me.
Of course it is important for parish councils, and other local councils, to follow high-quality data protection standards. The Information Commissioner’s Office has provided extensive guidance to help organisations to prepare for their new responsibilities, and I urge councils to look at it.

The responsibilities of data protection officers—this is relevant to the issue raised by the hon. Gentleman—can be implemented in different ways. For instance, several parish councils can choose to share a single data protection officer, provided that he or she is easily accessible from each establishment. The system does not require the hiring of one person per organisation. Organisations have already been set up to provide this service, and the service itself is important. In the case of a small organisation, such as a very small business or a parish council on a low budget, it is still important for data to be handled and protected carefully, because small organisations too can hold very sensitive personal information. I am extremely sympathetic to the plight organisations too can hold very sensitive personal information. I am extremely sympathetic to the plight

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. He is being very generous.

I knew that some small businesses in my constituency were concerned about the impact of the GDPR, so I telephoned the Information Commissioner’s Office to find out what support was available to them. The only answer that the office could give to every question that I asked about how the GDPR would affect small businesses was “Go to the website.” Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should expect better from a telephone line that is funded by the taxpayer?

Matt Hancock: I am glad that there is a telephone line. I am sure that the Information Commissioner will be watching the debate and will hear the plea for clear guidance on how small organisations in particular should implement data protection standards, whether they are small councils or small businesses. However, the Information Commissioner’s Office has already provided clearer guidance, as well as the telephone line. It is obviously listening, with the aim of getting the guidance right and ensuring that, in lay terms, meeting the new standards is straightforward. This issue came up in the other place as well. It is important for us to get the implementation right, especially in the case of small organisations.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Secretary of State has referred to the right to be forgotten. May I suggest that there might be another right, namely the right to be remembered correctly? All too often, in response to freedom of information requests about, for instance, national security, the Government have imposed a blanket ban on the publication of any information—even many years after the individual concerned has died, when it is pretty difficult to see why there should still be a national security issue. I am also convinced that it is not a good idea for us to have some means of extracting such information in 20, 30, 40 or 50 years’ time.

Matt Hancock: The Bill does not change the freedom of information regime. However, it does establish a data protection regime relating to intelligence services and national security, about which I shall say more shortly, and which will no doubt be scrutinised by the House. The specific issue of the release of records is not in the scope of the Bill, because it is about the protection of live data rather than the release of records. The 30-year rule has, in the main, been changed to a 20-year rule, but of course there are national security opt-outs, some of which are incredibly important.

Chris Bryant: Of course there should be national security opt-outs, and when we were changing the rule from 30 to 20 years, I was one of the Ministers who ensured that they were strong. My anxiety is, however, that all too often the security services impose a complete blanket ban, which means that we as a nation are not properly able to understand what happened in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. If we were better informed about that, we might be able to make better decisions for our own national security in the future.

Matt Hancock: I do not wish to labour the point. I too was the Minister responsible for national security releases. All I can say is that that is not within the scope of the Bill, and I think the system works effectively.

As recommended by Dame Fiona Caldicott, the National Data Guardian for Health and Care, the Bill creates a new offence of the unlawful re-identification of de-identified personal data. It offers new safeguards for children, including a new code on age-appropriate website design. Currently, the law on parental consent for children on social media is complicated, but in most cases it applies to children up to 12 years old. The Bill provides for consent to be required in the case of children aged up to 13, so that parents have more control but the law is still practical.

The Bill also sets out clearer frameworks for data security—for example, by giving everyone a right to know when their data has been breached. We are strengthening the enforcement powers of the Information Commissioner to reflect a world in which data is held and used in much more sophisticated ways than ever before. Under the Bill, the commissioner can issue substantial penalties of up to 4% of global turnover. When she finds criminality, she can also prosecute. With greater control, greater transparency and greater security for our data, the Bill will help to give us a statute book that is fit for the digital age as we leave the EU.

Let me now touch on some specific areas in a little more detail. This is a forensic Bill with 208 clauses. It covers a vast area of British life, including financial services, sport, the protection of equality and much more. It also includes provisions that will support Members of this House in the work that we do, and it will make it easier for us to take up casework on behalf of our constituents.

The Bill provides for three parallel schemes to protect personal data. First, on general data, which accounts for the vast majority of data processing across all sectors of the economy and the public sector, this part of the Bill works in tandem with the EU’s GDPR, which we have discussed. We know that small businesses need advice on this, and it is important to get right the advice from the Information Commissioner’s Office. It says in my notes that the ICO has a small business helpline, but we have already heard about that in the debate.
Rebecca Pow: I have been contacted by a number of businesses in Taunton Deane that are concerned about the work already placed on them to comply with data protection legislation. Can the Secretary of State confirm that this Bill will not give them a further workload, that it will indeed help those needing to trade in future across Europe and that it should, overall, be a benefit?

Matt Hancock: That is right. The Bill is structured to be consistent with the EU law elements of GDPR, which automatically apply from 25 May this year, to ensure that the non-EU elements of data protection, with respect to general data processing, national security data and law enforcement data, provide for a full spectrum framework for data protection once we leave the EU. The Bill is designed in such a way that it is as simple as possible for businesses to comply with the data protection standards that will be directly enforced from 25 May anyway. That is why from the point of view of small businesses, it is important that we get this Bill through by 25 May, and we have a fully functioning data protection framework. However, I certainly take on board, and am sympathetic to, the concerns my hon. Friend raises about small businesses and the need to ensure our data system is innovative in the future, and that people can comply with the rules. I hope that satisfies her on the concerns of small councils and indeed small charities, which have to comply as well.

The schemes are designed to make sure the police can keep using and sharing personal data to prevent and investigate crime, to bring offenders to justice and to keep communities safe. Likewise, the Bill makes provisions for the personal data processed by our intelligence agencies, so they can continue to protect our country at a time of heightened terrorist threat. The intelligence services will be part of this new framework under the supervision of the Information Commissioner.

We also want to support the hard-hitting investigative journalism that holds the powerful to account and that we have touched on already—and it is good to see my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) engaging with the digital economy on his smartphone; I am delighted that he welcomes at least some elements of the 21st century. On this point, I want briefly to comment on the proposed clauses inserted by the Lords. I set out our response to the consultation on the future of the Leveson inquiry last week, so I will not set out the arguments again in full this afternoon, but I will say this: the amendments are simply not the answer to today’s problems faced by the media. It has been six years since the Leveson inquiry reported; since then, we have seen the completion of three detailed police investigations, extensive reforms to police practices and some of the most significant changes to press self-regulation in recent times. Meanwhile, the media are facing critical challenges that threaten their sustainability, including fake news, declining circulations and in gaining revenue from online content.

On top of that, the amendments undermine our devolution settlement. The new clauses seek to legislate on a UK-wide basis, despite press regulation being a reserved power for the devolved Administrations. I hope Scottish National party Members, and indeed all Members, will join me in voting these amendments down.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Secretary of State is not sounding any more convincing than he did in his statement on Thursday. Failure to proceed with part two of Leveson and section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 is a disgusting and cowardly betrayal of the victims of media harassment. It does not even leave those victims in the same position as before, because since Leveson the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 has hobbed the ability of claimants in privacy and defamation actions to access no-win, no-fee representation. Therefore, section 40 is now the only way to ensure access to justice, which is as helpful to small publishers as it is to citizens. Why does the Secretary of State not put their interests before those of big newspaper groups, instead of currying favour for himself and his weak Government?

Matt Hancock: We debated this at length on Thursday and discussed the fact that it is vital that we look to what is needed for the media now, to ensure that instead of having a set of proposals that were designed several years ago and that would lead to any claimant being able to claim costs no matter the merits of their case, we have measures that enable our press to be sustainable for the future.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I support the Secretary of State in proposing that these amendments be removed. Like many in this place, I have been on the wrong end of fake news and misrepresentation many times, so I do not do so out of personal interest. I think there is a wider public interest: a free press is an extremely important part of a democracy. The press will not always get it right, but we need to be very careful about the amendments from the Lords.

Matt Hancock: I wholeheartedly agree with my right hon. Friend.

This Bill is an essential piece of legislation that makes the UK’s data laws among the most effective in the world. This House must never shy away from supporting new technology. The Electric Lighting Act 1882 was considered so important that the House sat on a Saturday to get it through. I hope that will not be necessary this time, but I do hope that the House will adopt similar enthusiasm in backing this Bill. Doing so would support our entrepreneurs in harnessing the value of data, while giving citizens confidence when they go online.

I was pleased a few weeks ago that the Opposition Front-Bench teams in the other place agreed that the Bill was a positive and necessary step. I hope the whole House will agree tonight, and I commend this Bill to the House.

6.46 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I refer hon. Members to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, and, at the risk of emptying the Chamber early this evening, I should start by reassuring the Minister that Labour will not be opposing this Bill on Second Reading. It is an important piece of legislation, and parts of it absolutely have to be incorporated into domestic law by May this year, and we do not intend to stand in its way.

But that is not to say that we are content with the Bill as it is. Many improvements have been made in the other place—many with cross-party support, and some,
which I will discuss in more detail, against the wishes of the Government—but there are more changes that we need to make, and the Opposition will be pressing for them as the Bill proceeds through its Commons stages. I pay tribute to the work of peers on all sides, and in particular to my Labour colleagues, Lord Stevenson, Lord Kennedy, Lord Griffiths and Lord Grantham, for their work on the Opposition Front Bench.

In 2016, I set up the independent Future of Work Commission to look at the challenges and opportunities created by the new technological revolution. Just as Harold Wilson spoke 54 years ago about the opportunities of the “white heat” of what was then cutting-edge technology, so we now need to make sure that we are seizing the opportunities that the new digital economy presents to us. That is where many of the jobs of the future lie—where the raw materials are not steel or minerals or plastics, but data. The commission concluded that, with the right policy framework around it, the new technologies of artificial intelligence, massive processing power and digital transfer can create as many jobs as they destroy and enhance many jobs that currently exist.

None of that is inevitable, however, because we are not doing enough to exploit the opportunities created by this new world of work. Britain is unprepared for the technological revolution. We think this demands strategic planning, as the policy choices we make now will shape how technological change will affect the work and lives of our citizens.

I think we all in this House accept that, as we leave the European Union, we need to make sure that we still have unhindered flows of data between the EU and the UK; anything else would do huge damage to our economy. As the House of Lords European Union Committee report on “Brexit: the EU data protection package” concluded,

“any arrangement that resulted in greater friction around data transfers between the UK and the EU post-Brexit could hinder police and security cooperation. It could also present a non-tariff barrier to trade, particularly in services, putting companies operating out of the UK at a competitive disadvantage.”

So it is vital that we get this Bill right.

We will be seeking more information from the Government than was forthcoming in the Bill’s passage through the other place on how we will allow continuous transfers between the UK and the EU post-Brexit could hinder “any arrangement that resulted in greater friction around data transfers between the UK and the EU post-Brexit could hinder police and security cooperation. It could also present a non-tariff barrier to trade, particularly in services, putting companies operating out of the UK at a competitive disadvantage.”

We hope that our proposals are more ambitious than the Government’s digital charter and less reliant on voluntary codes of conduct, which can be ignored by big social media and data giants. Instead, we believe we need a statutory code of enforceable rights offering people proper control over their own data, appropriate remedies when their data is misused and proportionate sanctions to deter unlawful data processing. Rights for children need to be at the core of this. Children make up one third of internet users worldwide, and one in five in the UK, so we welcome the improvements made by Baroness Kidron’s amendment on age-appropriate design, but we want to work with the Government to do more to ensure that children are properly served by the Bill.

We believe that a right of privacy is key to any strong regime of rights. It is easy for individuals to have their privacy invaded as a result of sharing data on the internet, so we will be pushing for the incorporation of article 8 of the charter of fundamental rights, with all the appropriate safeguards and balancing tests. We hope that the Government will see the benefit of this to a future adequacy decision with the EU.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure that, like me, my hon. Friend has had a number of letters from people who are concerned about their privacy and their rights in relation to privacy.

Tom Watson: Yes, indeed. Privacy in the age of the net, with huge data flows and information in abundance, is the debate of the age. There is no doubt that this House will be discussing privacy in the years to come, beyond this Bill and beyond further regulation. In this particular Bill, however, we must ensure that privacy is not just entrusted to the delegated powers of the Minister and that it is a fundamental right that our citizens can start to develop.

Parliament is also considering the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which, in combination with this Bill, risks eliminating the GDPR as a check on the misuse of ministerial authority to undermine data privacy rights. It gives Ministers power to make secondary legislation to amend any retained EU law, which would include those governing data protection rights. The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, as currently drafted, eliminates the important data protection rights of article 8, which would otherwise constrain Ministers’ ability to erode fundamental data privacy protections. So we want to make it explicit in the Bill that those protections cannot be eroded. Strong rights need strong enforcement and a proper mechanism to enable enforcement to take place. This is all the more vital where the data rights of children are involved. We therefore want to see the Bill amended to ensure that consumer groups that operate in the privacy field can act on behalf of data subjects without a particular complaint—a right of collective, not just individual, redress.

The Government have chosen not to implement article 80(2) of the GDPR, which gives greater ability for civil society and other representative bodies to act on behalf of citizens and mirrors consumer rights in goods and services. A super-complainant system would help to protect anonymity and create a stronger enforcement framework. Collective redress and representative action led by a recognised body would also help individuals to enforce their rights to data protection when their data
is exposed, stolen or misused as part of a large data breach that affects multiple people. It would create a stronger enforcement framework, which would build and reinforce trust without overburdening existing institutions.

I want to turn to two amendments—improvements—made in the other place that the Government have already said they wish to overturn. Indeed, as soon as the votes had taken place, the Secretary of State tweeted that they were votes against press freedom—even though they were also votes in favour of a policy agreed by all parties in 2012, and for which he himself, the former Prime Minister and the current Prime Minister had previously voted. So it was no great surprise when the Secretary of State made his announcement last week about ditching Leveson part 2 and binning section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. His tweet, as I think he will recognise, somewhat pre-empted his consultation response. However, we live in a country where Parliament is sovereign, so the decision is not entirely up to him. It is up to us in this House. We can decide whether to keep the promises made by David Cameron—and by all parties—to the victims of phone hacking and other press abuse in 2012, or to break them.

Chris Bryant: Was there not also a promise, in a sense, to Brian Leveson? The guarantee was that a single inquiry was to be carried out. I am sure that my hon. Friend has seen the correspondence in which Leveson himself says that he fundamentally disagrees with the Government’s position because the only regard in which he thinks the terms of reference should be changed is that they should be increased, so that we could see whether the Independent Press Standards Organisation was indeed any different from the Press Complaints Commission at all.

Tom Watson: A characteristically articulate question, there. My hon. Friend will not be surprised to learn that I am coming on to that point in my speech now.

Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 legislates for the part of the Leveson system that would provide access to justice for ordinary citizens, while offering protection to journalists and newspapers that signed up to any Leveson-compliant self-regulatory body. I want to take on one argument that I think is a complete red herring. Some elements of the media do not like IMPRESS—the only self-regulator that has so far been given royal charter approval, yet it is funded by this deeply unsavoury figure, from whom I believe the hon. Gentleman has now dissociated himself.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for his earlier and quite proper reference to his entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. IMPRESS is there, and it has been funded by Max Mosley, who has been exposed as a racist and as someone who indulges in orgies and who has been waging a war against the press. The free press does not want to be regulated by a state-approved regulator. That is fundamental to the freedoms we enjoy in our society. Clauses 168 and 169 effectively impose IMPRESS as the only body that has sought and received royal charter approval, yet it is funded by this deeply unsavoury figure, from whom I believe the hon. Gentleman has now dissociated himself.

Tom Watson: I do not believe that Max Mosley now holds the views ascribed to him. This is what happens when people take on press barons and the billionaires who back them. That is what is going on here. The hon. Gentleman, the Minister and everyone in this House knows that the press barons do not want this regulation. Some years ago, probably before the hon. Gentleman was elected to this House, I remember that MPs were frightened of speaking out about media abuse lest they receive retribution, so I will not take any lessons when people who stand up for media reform see their characters traduced and destroyed in the press.

Several hon. Members rose—

Tom Watson: I will make some progress.

In his statement to the House last week, the Secretary of State said that Sir Brian “agrees that the inquiry should not proceed under the current terms of reference but believes that it should continue in an amended form.”—[Official Report, 1 March 2018; Vol. 636, c. 966.] I do not know about you, Madam Deputy Speaker—[Interruption.] Oh, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With a name like Lindsay, who knows? [Laughter.]

Tom Watson: I am not rising to that. I do not know about you, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I got the distinct impression from the Secretary of State’s presentation that Brian Leveson supported his proposals. That was something of an understatement. In fact, Sir Brian says that he disagrees “fundamentally” with the Government’s position, stating: “I have no doubt that there is still a legitimate expectation on behalf of the public and, in particular, the alleged victims of phone hacking and other unlawful conduct, that there will be a full public examination of the circumstances that allowed that behaviour to develop and clear reassurances that nothing of the same scale could occur again: that is what they were promised”. Sir Brian is clear that this breaks a promise to the victims, and it does so by using a very clever sleight of hand. The Secretary of State told the House that 12% of direct respondents to the consultation were in favour of continuing the inquiry, with 66% against. How did the Government get to that landslide verdict? Scandalously, they disregarded the 200,000 people who signed an online petition in favour of continuing the inquiry, but they included thousands of pro forma newspaper coupons that various papers encouraged their readers to send in. Sir Brian said to the Government: “I would not personally count the responses in the way in which you have.”
Matt Hancock: As the hon. Gentleman may or may not know, it is entirely standard to count in that way. The same was done on the questions of equal marriage and of BBC charter reform, because there is a material difference between clicking a button to sign a preformed digital signature and writing in separately. This is how things have been in other big consultations. It is entirely normal, and the full details were set out last Thursday.

Tom Watson: The Secretary of State is obviously living in the analogue age if he thinks that he can accept a coupon from The Sun but ignore 200,000 citizens expressing their concern about the inquiry.

I have only one question for the Secretary of State. Will the Government be able to detail what they will do if evidence of wrongdoing is revealed, in particular if editors misled or were partial in their evidence to the original inquiry? We still need Leveson 2, and Sir Brian agrees.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend is making excellent work of exposing the Government on this point, but things go a stage further than this. Abandoning Leveson against the wishes of Lord Leveson is a constitutional provocation, because it puts party interest above due process. If that is going to happen with one inquiry, why will it not happen with Grenfell or contaminated blood? What will stop the Government doing things that are in their own interests, not those of victims?

Tom Watson: My hon. Friend makes an important and fair point that I hope the analogue Minister will reflect on.

Rather than protecting the public from the abuse of their data, committed by or on behalf of newspaper publishers, the Government have capitulated to the media. In his letter, Sir Brian said that “the press is in a unique position because there is no other body in a position to hold the very real exercise of power by the press to account and to expose its wrongdoing to the public”.

In short, the press has no predators. As this Bill makes its way into law, we will be voting to redress that imbalance and to keep our promises.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. If we work on a 10-minute limit, but without me imposing it, everybody will get equal time.

7.5 pm

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I will start with a little anecdote about my local paper and IPSO. On 9 November, just four days after the Paradise papers story broke, the Hereford Times published the headline, “Tory MP dragged into offshore row”. It clearly implied a connection between me, a law firm I have never had anything to do with, and tax avoidance, which, equally, I have had nothing to do with. To make matters worse, the editor then chose to publish letters the next week from readers who believed that I was part of the Paradise papers. Amazingly, IPSO ruled that that was not misleading or inaccurate in any way. Even though the article contained factual inaccuracies that I had pointed out, IPSO’s complaints committee simply ignored them. IPSO is a press protector, not a press regulator. MPs can speak out against it in the public domain, but normal people have no such voice, so we need this excellent Bill, which I look forward to supporting, largely because of the amendments from Earl Attlee.

Let me describe the Hereford Times a little bit. It is owned by Newsquest, which is a wholly owned subsidiary of Gannett Company UK, the UK branch of Gannett Company—a US media giant. In 2015, Newsquest reported a loss of £24,349,000. Meanwhile, Gannett reported revenues of £2.89 billion and a net income of over £146 million. On 11 August 2017, Chris Morley from the National Union of Journalists described Newsquest as “exporting tens of millions of pounds profit to its US masters”.

In October 2016, the NUJ said, after its pay survey, that Newsquest was one of the stingiest employers, despite Gannett paying its top five executives over £15 million between them. I am pleased to say that I do not believe that John Wilson, the rather hopeless editor of the Hereford Times, was one of them.

Moving on to Leveson 2, Baroness Hollins’ amendment provides for an inquiry with similar terms of reference to part 2 of the Leveson inquiry. I am obviously extremely disappointed that the Government last week chose to abandon Lord Leveson’s recommendations. The inquiry was always one inquiry in two parts, not two inquiries, and it should not stop halfway through. Sir Brian Leveson was absolutely clear in his letter to the Secretary of State that he does not want the inquiry to stop halfway. However, there is no justification for spending millions on part 2 if we are simply to abandon the recommendations of part 1. We must carry out the recommendations of part 1 and then continue with the second half of the inquiry.

An amendment put forward by Earl Attlee in the other place adds provisions similar to those in section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. The Secretary of State last week suggested that the current system of press regulation was sufficient and that implementing section 40 would damage the freedom of the press and hurt vulnerable local papers, but he is wrong on all those counts. In response to the idea that the current system of regulation is sufficient, I point out that IPSO cannot be “largely compliant.” It is not possible to be largely pregnant—someone is either pregnant or not. As per the Secretary of State’s statement, a regulator either follows all 29 criteria or it does not. IPSO does not, and therefore it is not the method of press regulation that Leveson recommended and that has already been passed into law. The Secretary of State suggests that we do not need further regulation. Why would we regulate energy providers, communications providers and even exam providers, but simply decide to trust newspapers that have criminal convictions? That is plainly barmy.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is ironic that the press is not to be regulated, when broadcasters are, via Ofcom?

Bill Wiggin: Either we regulate or we do not, but we cannot do both. That is why it is important that the Bill passes into law as it is. I agree with the hon. Lady.

The second accusation is that Earl Attlee’s amendments would damage the freedom of the press. The Press Recognition Panel is entirely independent of the Government and the press. It is funded by the Government, but so are the courts, and no one would accuse the
judiciary of being influenced by the Government. In
addition, the PRP’s charter is as good as unamendable,
as amendment requires a 66% supermajority in both
Houses and, crucially, the unanimous agreement of the
PRP board, so any Government who chose to change
press regulation would find it far easier to do so through
primary legislation. It is fiction to think the PRP is
anything other than independent.

Finally, it has been suggested that Earl Attlee’s
amendments would harm local newspapers financially.
Section 40 is not about punishing newspapers; it is
about creating a fair and low-cost arbitration process
that is good for local newspapers and for vulnerable
individuals. Lord Leveson envisaged his proposals protecting
local newspapers from rich and powerful litigants, and
he certainly did not intend for newspapers to refuse to
join a regulator.

Section 40 is not only desirable but necessary. IPSO
will never agree to apply to become an approved regulator
unless it is forced to, and section 40 would ensure that it
happened. These measures already received the full support
of both Houses in proceedings on the Crime and Courts
Act. We must now implement them. The challenge goes
out to the Opposition parties: there is support on both
sides of the House for section 40, but if there are not
sufficient Members here to vote for it, the Government
will have their way. I hope we will make sure that this
House does not bend the knee to the power of the press
barons, but remembers its role to speak up for the
people who have no money, and who

7.12 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Scottish
National party acknowledges the need for a new and
comprehensive data protection framework that safeguards
human rights, and updates UK data protection law to
bring it in line with the European Union’s general data
protection regulation. We want a Data Protection Bill
that makes the UK’s data protection laws fit for the
digital age, that enshrines the principle of transparency
and accountability and that gives all citizens and consumers
greater control over who has access to their personal
information and what those parties can do with it.

Despite what we have heard in the debate, this is a
wide-ranging and complicated Bill. The House is agreed
on many aspects of it, but in certain crucial areas, it
falls short of what we expect from modern data protection
legislation. Specifically, we are concerned about the
Bill’s provisions on the UK’s derogation from the GDPR
for the purposes of effective immigration control. We
also have concerns about automated decision making,
the use of national security certificates and the lack of
provision for collective redress. We are also very concerned
about the consequences for the UK as it tries to secure
greater control over who has access to their personal
information, and thereby understand the complicated
information, which could be used by the Home
Office, the applicant

We will definitely seek to challenge paragraph 4 of
part 1 of schedule 2, which is effectively an immigration
exemption that permits the Government to collect and
hold data without subject knowledge; we find that deeply
worrying. Equally concerning is that there is no legal
definition of immigration control, or the maintenance
of effective immigration control, anywhere in the Bill.
Given that effective immigration control is both highly
subjective and highly political, I fear it will make individuals’
rights extremely susceptible to changes in political tides.
This broad, wide-ranging exemption is fundamentally
unfair, and it runs contrary to basic human rights. It is
unprecedented and as unnecessary as it is disproportionate.

Under this exemption, the Government will remove
any obligation they have under data protection law to
inform an individual that their data has been transferred
to the Home Office for immigration control purposes.
The individual concerned would not know that their
data was being held, or that they were under investigation.
They would have no right to see what data of theirs was
being held by the Home Office, or to find out why it was
being held. They would have no way of checking the
accuracy of the information held by the Home Office,
and they would have no way of correcting any mistakes
in that information, which could be used by the Home
Office to decide whether they could live in this country.

That means that one early error in data collection or
processing could become indisputable fact by the time it
reached the Home Office, and the Home Office could
base its case against an individual on that. As MPs, we
all know how often information held on individuals
turns out to be wrong. This is an issue of basic fairness,
and it is little wonder that the measure has been roundly
condemned by numerous civil liberties groups and by
many in the legal profession.

If the measure is enacted, it would be a fundamental
change to the way things currently work, whereby data
held on an individual can be obtained through a subject
access request. As it stands, the Home Office, the applicant
and the applicant’s legal representative all have access
to the same information, and it is that information on
which claims and legal challenges are based. Surely, if
both sides do not have access to the same information,
the fairness of legal proceedings is inevitably compromised.

Subject access requests are often the only route through
which legal professionals can obtain access to such
information, and thereby understand the complicated
immigration history of some of their clients. Indeed, for
applicants who have been the victim of domestic abuse
and who were in a controlling relationship for years
before seeking help on immigration matters, a subject
access request may be their only way of establishing
their basis for settlement and for gaining independence
from an abusive partner. This exemption will reduce a
legal representative’s ability to best represent their client,
and it will remove an important tool in holding the
Home Office to account when it ignores or seeks to
misrepresent the facts.

Further to the comments of the hon. Member for West
Bromwich East (Tom Watson), we also strongly recommend
that the Government look again at clause 183, and make
provision for suitably qualified non-profit organisations
to pursue action. As the Bill stands, clause 183 could be
misused; if the measure is enacted, it could be used to
misrepresent the facts.

As the Secretary of State is well aware, SNP Members
and the Scottish Government are extremely concerned
about clause 168, which concerns section 40 of the
Crime and Courts Act 2013. Clause 168 was inserted in
the other place and impinges on areas wholly devoted
to the Scottish Parliament. While we will do all we can
to ensure the Bill is as constructive as possible in assisting the passage of the
Bill, we will table our own amendments and support
other Members’ amendments on those issues in Committee.

Finally, it has been suggested that Earl Attlee’s
amendments would harm local newspapers financially.

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Further to the comments of the hon. Member for West
Bromwich East (Tom Watson), we also strongly recommend
that the Government look again at clause 183, and make
provision for suitably qualified non-profit organisations
to pursue action. As the Bill stands, clause 183 only
allows individuals to request that suitably qualified organisations take up a case on their behalf, rather than allowing such organisations to highlight where they believe a breach of data protection law has occurred.

All too often, individuals are the last to know that their data has been unlawfully used, and in many cases those best placed to identify unlawful practices are the organisations that do the independent research and investigation. We hope that clause 183 can be amended to ensure that not-for-profit organisations have the right to raise complaints themselves when they consider that people's data protection rights have been infringed.

I also want to raise the matter of automated decision making and, in particular, clause 14, which permits exemptions from the right not to be subject to an automated decision. We strongly believe that automated decision making without human intervention should be subject to the strictest limitations, and it has to address fairness, transparency, accountability and issues of discrimination. The Bill provides insufficient safeguards. This is not about an online retailer suggesting what book or song someone might wish to download, based on previous purchases; this is about decisions being made without human oversight that can have long-term, serious consequences for an individual's health, or their financial, employment or legal status.

As I understand it, clause 48 would allow law enforcement agencies to make purely automated decisions. This is fraught with danger and is, we believe, not only at odds with the Data Protection Act 1998, but against article 22 of the GDPR, which gives individuals the right not to be subject to purely automated decisions. The GDPR contains provision for EU member states to opt out of this, but that opt-out does not apply if the data subject's rights, freedoms and legitimate interests are undermined. I urge the Government to look again at those parts of the Bill on automated decision making and to make it explicit that where automated processing is carried out, a human will have to decide whether it is reasonable and appropriate to continue. That human intervention will provide transparency and accountability, and ensure that the state is not infringing an individual's fundamental rights, liberties and privacy. Those issues are often subjective and beyond the concept of an algorithm.

Another area of concern, which we will raise in Committee, relates to the issuing of national security certificates, which allow restriction of and exemption from a wide range of rights in the Bill and the GDPR on the basis of national security and defence. It is right that a country should have an ability to do what is deemed to be in the best interests of its national security, but many would argue that, since 1998, national security certificates have received insufficient scrutiny of their impact on privacy or their proportionality. We are concerned that the proposals in the Bill go much further than those in the Data Protection Act 1998. We question whether the broad and indefinite nature of those national security exemptions is necessary and proportionate and whether the oversight of the issuing of national security certificates is sufficient. As the Bill is drafted, an individual's rights could be removed by a politician without any form of judicial oversight. Surely it cannot be right for an individual's rights to be undermined so easily, purely on the say-so of a Minister.

Of course, even in normal circumstances, the passage of this Bill would be challenging, given its nature, size, scope and complexity, but it has to be seen against the backdrop of Brexit, as does everything we do and have done for the past two years. We have to not only comply with the GDPR, but do so in such a way that the United Kingdom achieves an adequacy decision from the European Commission, allowing it to continue to operate securely and freely within the framework of the GDPR. I fear that much of what is proposed in this Bill, particularly on the immigration exemption and the national security certificates, jeopardises achieving that adequacy decision, as before granting such a decision the European Commission is obliged to consider a variety of issues, including respect for fundamental rights. As we have heard, the GDPR will evolve over time, and the UK will have to maintain adequacy, and that means amending our data protection to keep it in line with European law.

My final point relates to amendment 147 from the other place, which will have the same effect as implementing section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. The Minister is aware that although data protection is a reserved issue, both criminal justice and press regulation are wholly devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Furthermore, the concept of exemplary damages does not exist in Scots law, and the Scottish Government have no intention of changing the law for the purposes of incentivising participation in a press regulation system. As it stands, this Bill seeks to regulate the press by means of civil procedure, both of which, as I say, are devolved to the Scottish Parliament. As I said in the Chamber last week, we believe that all individuals should be able to seek redress when they feel they have been the victim of press malpractice, and the Scottish Government will continue to engage with the Scottish press on independent self-regulation. The Secretary of State has had correspondence on this matter from myself and Fiona Hyslop, the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs, who wrote to the UK Government last month making clear the Scottish Government's position on this matter. On the second part of the Leveson inquiry, she was equally clear that press regulation and any associated issues around the culture, practices and ethics of the press would be a matter for the Scottish Government. Furthermore, and that in any future inquiry, the distinct legal context in Scotland must be taken into account. It benefits every one of us to have a data protection regime that is transparent and accountable and that has at its heart the rights of the individual to control what happens with their data.

Although there is much that we agree on in this Bill, there are areas that give us serious cause for concern. In Committee, we will therefore table amendments and support others' amendments that seek to address concerns about the immigration exemption, collective redress, automated decision making, the scope of national security certificates and, of course, section 40 as it relates to Scotland. These amendments will seek to strengthen the Bill, to guarantee that everyone's human rights are protected equally and to ensure that, going forward, the UK has the best chance of securing the adequacy decision that it requires, post Brexit.

7.26 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I start by declaring an interest, in that before I became embroiled in the world of politics, I was a journalist for 20 years,
although not in the print media—I had the perfect face for radio, so it was the wireless that beckoned. As a former journalist, I take a close interest in two of the matters before us this evening, and I refer to two of the amendments that were made in the other place. I am a bit perturbed as to why we would be dealing with those two specific issues in a data protection Bill, because this Bill seems to be being used somewhat as a Christmas tree, on which all sorts of things can hang, and I am not sure that that is appropriate.

I am sure, however, that the Secretary of State was right to say in his statement last Thursday that the Government will not be accepting those two amendments. I refer, of course, to that on the implementation of section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, which I shall come to in a moment, and the amendment providing that we should proceed with Leveson 2. I was glad that he announced on Thursday that we would not be going ahead with that, because it is absolutely the right decision, for a number of reasons, not least because the manifesto on which we were elected nine months ago said that we would not be going ahead with it.

Putting politics aside for a little while, let me say that there are a number of reasons why it is not necessary to go ahead with that. The main one is that the environment has changed dramatically since the first Leveson inquiry. It has changed dramatically since I was last working as a journalist, which was way back in 2006, but even since 2012 and Leveson 1, the landscape has changed dramatically.

Chris Bryant: That is neither here nor there, because the whole point of the Leveson inquiry was to establish what happened. Hundreds of individuals have had to go through the civil courts to try to establish what happened in their individual case. Many of them now know more than the country does about what happened at that time, but they are unable to say so because they have had to sign confidentiality agreements. The truth of the matter is that we still have never got to the bottom of what level of collusion there was between the Metropolitan police and the News of the World, and many newspapers have simply lied.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I was coming to some of the points that the hon. Gentleman mentions, but the issue is that if Leveson 2 had gone ahead, it would have been narrowly and tightly about the relationship between the media and the police.

I absolutely welcome Leveson 1: it did a job that needed to be done by shining a light into the dark corners of some media practices and, importantly, giving redress to people who had been wronged by the media—there were too many of those. There are people who feel that it did not go far enough, and some still feel that they did not get their confirmed right of reply, but the fact is that Leveson 1 has happened, and it happened some little time ago.

Leveson 2 would have had the fairly narrow remit of the relationship between the police and the media. The argument I was coming to was that since Leveson 2 was mooted, so much has changed in the regulation of the press, as we have already been discussing. The new regulatory regime is now under way—I might come to some of its drawbacks in a moment—and, furthermore, the practices of the police have changed a lot.

Leveson shined a light on the problems. I take the point made by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) that the relationship between some officers and some journalists was shown by Leveson 1 to be absolutely inappropriate. I do not believe that we need a costly, lengthy, long-drawn-out second phase of the Leveson process, which probably would not do the job we would be hoping of it anyway.

Chris Bryant: The point is that the investigation is sort of happening now through the civil courts, except that it is individual members of the public who have to fork out £350,000 or £450,000 in legal fees to get to the truth. In Leveson 1, Brian Leveson was expressly not able to look at anything for which there might have been any criminal charges. The fact that the Daily Mirror has now admitted—in the civil courts, but not to Leveson—that it did engage in phone hacking is one of the matters that still has not come to the public.

Peter Heaton-Jones: However, Leveson 2 would not necessarily put any of that right.

Chris Bryant: Yes it would!

Peter Heaton-Jones: Well, we do not know that. The difficulty is that a lengthy, costly process that in the end might not even achieve what was hoped for is not the answer. The answer, as the Secretary of State rightly said in his statement on Thursday, is to ensure that we shine a light through proper regulation on the practices that have done wrong to a number of people in the country.

I accept the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin). We should absolutely focus on the rights of people in this country—people who cannot afford the voice to stand up for themselves—but Leveson 2 was never going to solve that issue. It was going to be a long-winded inquiry that would not have got there, and the Secretary of State made that point convincingly on Thursday.

Christine Jardine: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me, a fellow former journalist, that one of the things that has most undermined the reputation of the media in this country in general has been the behaviour of our newspapers, which have seemed to the public to be beyond regulation? Self-regulation has failed and undermined the image of the media. The Press Complaints Commission failed, as the Press Council did. We had an opportunity to put that right, but it has been lost.

Peter Heaton-Jones: The hon. Lady is right that the Press Complaints Commission did fail, which is why it is rightly no longer there and we now have a new framework. While we are talking in general about regulation, I should say that I have some sympathy with the question marks raised over the regulation of my former employer, the BBC. We got that wrong for many years. There was the bizarre situation in which the BBC board—later, the BBC Trust—was acting as both pasha and gamekeeper, marking its own homework. The Government have rightly sought to put that right and we have moved a long way towards doing so.

I do not believe that the answer to the wrongs that still exist in the regulatory regime for newspapers lies in the amendments that have come our way from the other end of the Palace of Westminster. I do not believe that
they would do the job that, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire rightly said, the people outside this place want us to do: to make sure that they have a fair right of reply when something wrong is done to them by newspapers.

**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is being characteristically courteous in giving way to so many Members. Can he point to another area of public policy in which as many suspicions have been aroused, but that has been improved by our collectively deciding to just move on and leave things in the dark?

**Peter Heaton-Jones**: No one is suggesting just moving on and leaving things in the dark. That is not at all what the Government intend to do. If we look carefully at the words the Secretary of State used on Thursday, we see that there is no question of our moving on and saying, “There’s nothing to see here.” We are saying that the mechanism suggested in the amendments from the other place is not the right way to proceed. I agree with the position taken by the Secretary of State.

**Liam Byrne**: With the greatest of respect, regulations are forward looking, but the inquiry that we are seeking goes into past malpractice for the simple reason that we would like justice to be done.

**Peter Heaton-Jones**: I do not believe that the inquiry that the other place seeks, through its amendment, to impose on the Bill would do the job that the right hon. Gentleman wants done. The position that the Secretary of State laid out on Thursday is the right way to proceed. Leveson 2 would simply not do the job that the other place seeks, through its amendment, to impose on the Bill. It would not do the job that the right hon. Member for North Herefordshire rightly said, the people outside this place want us to do: to make sure that they have a fair right of reply when something wrong is done to them by newspapers.

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con) *rose—*

**Peter Heaton-Jones**: However, I will give way to my hon. Friend.

**Matt Warman**: For the sake of novelty, my hon. Friend is taking an intervention from the Government side.

The one point that my hon. Friend has not yet mentioned is that IPSO is a fundamentally very different regulator—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) might not like it, but low-cost mediation is a crucial feature that allows exactly the redress that he wants.

**Peter Heaton-Jones**: I had a lot to say about IPSO and IMPRESS along the lines that my hon. Friend has laid out, but I am aware of Mr Deputy Speaker’s strictures. I have tried to take as many interventions as I can, and page 2 of my remarks will be put down on this green Bench very shortly.

I move on to the second issue that I wanted to raise: the second amendment sent to us by the other place saying that we should commence section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. That would not be the right way to proceed, and I am grateful that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made that point so clearly on Thursday. Many local papers in North Devon have written to me on numerous occasions expressing deep concerns about the impact that section 40 would have. I mention just three: the *North Devon Journal*, the *North Devon Gazette* and the *South Molton & District News*, which is, incidentally, one of the few papers to have signed up to IMPRESS, the new press regulator.

Freedom of the press is absolutely essential in a democracy. Let us think carefully about what section 40 says: if a paper not under the auspices of a Press Recognition Panel regulator is sued for defamation, for instance, it has to pay the legal costs of both sides, even if it wins the case. How can that be sensible? We might argue that that is a pretty blunt instrument with the intention of coercing newspapers to sign up to one of the approved regulators, but 90% of the national press have not done so, so the blunt instrument is clearly not being effective. The biggest danger, however, is that many small, local media companies, such as those in my constituency that I have mentioned, would simply not be able to run a viable business if section 40 were enacted. Financially, the court costs would cripple them. Individuals could make vexatious claims in the knowledge that there was no chance of their ever having to pay costs, whatever the outcome. That is simply something up with which we will not put.

The local press in North Devon and many other parts of the country is still extraordinarily important. The two main papers I mentioned are still read widely today and help to maintain our sense of community. We cannot face a situation in which such papers are threatened by what could be a series of vexatious claims, encouraged by the fact that there would be no risk to the person making that claim.

**Andy Slaughter** *rose—*

**Christine Jardine** *rose—*

**Peter Heaton-Jones**: If hon. Members do not mind, I am coming to the end of my remarks.

In my 20 years as a journalist at the BBC, I was passionate about freedom of speech and a right of reply, because that is the desperately important foundation on which our newspaper industry is based. I am also desperately passionate about ensuring that people who are wronged in some way by the media are given an effective response mechanism. Neither amendment that has come our way from the other place would achieve that. I am grateful to hear that the Opposition will support the Bill’s Second Reading, and I hope that we will not accept those two amendments and that we will pass the Bill as it was drafted.

7.40 pm

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): I will not speak about the problems of the analogue past, but instead look ahead to the digital future. It is a pleasure to speak on a Bill that has been subject to very detailed scrutiny by some very eminent people in the other place.

It may seem curious to have such lengthy and detailed legislation before us when the heart of it, the GDPR, is actually somewhere else—it is, of course, in EU legislation. Our discussion is on how to implement it and other such issues rather than on the actual proposals themselves. I dare say that there are some who will jump to the
conclusion that it is yet another example of rules being made elsewhere. However, I take the opposite view, as this is legislation that British representatives helped to fashion in Brussels, and as I will point out later in my speech, because data flows across national boundaries, having a full and frank discussion with one’s neighbours is to one’s advantage, not disadvantage. By being in the European Union, through the GDPR as in so many other fields, we take control of our future, rather than hunker down in a defeated bunker and wait for others to do things to us—taking back control of nothing other than the ability to bemoan our unfortunate fate.

This debate today is very timely, because on Friday the Prime Minister finally made the first faltering steps towards recognising that reality. I was pleased to see her acknowledge just how important data is to our future—it was one of the four key areas that she outlined—but, even after all the warnings, she still does not seem quite to understand the pitfalls in seeking an adequacy arrangement when, without the freedoms that membership of the European Union gives us to determine our own balance between security and privacy, that balance will be subject to the very different judgment of other EU countries.

I have been fortunate, through my work as chair of the all-party group on data analytics, to learn from a range of very expert people about some of the possible advances that come with a much more sophisticated use of data. I have also learned of the fears that many rightly have about the potential consequences of those same advances. That is why I was pleased that, following the excellent work by the Royal Society led by Dame Ottoline Leyser from Cambridge among others, we do now have the prospect of a data ethics and governance body, and, perhaps unusually, I pay credit to the Government for bringing that forward. Although I have questioned exactly how that will sit within the current structures, particularly with the Information Commissioner’s Office, we have the potential to create something really rather important, and I hope that, in further discussion of this Bill, we will be able to explore with Ministers in more detail the future landscape for data governance.

We most certainly need such governance, because hardly a day goes by without further concerns being raised in one sphere or another, whether it be internet safety issues or the accurate reporting of news. To put it mildly, this is a big subject.

I will not attempt to address all, or even many, of the issues in the Bill; that can be for another day. Instead, I will confine my comments to one or two areas of particular concern. As someone who was very taken by the account of the potential dangers of relying too heavily on closed algorithms when I read the aptly titled “Weapons of Math Destruction” by Cathy O’Neil, I must mention the concern so many of us feel about the dangers of automated decision making, which so risk hardcoding previous injustices and social and cultural prejudices. In this Bill in particular, I share the concerns already raised about the immigration exemption.

A further concern raised in general about GDPR is the potential unintended consequences on some voluntary organisations, particularly small ones. It may be that the Bill is not clear on this point, and it may be that some accounts have caused people to be more fearful than they need be, but I was struck just a few days ago to hear from a small charity in Cambridge that it had decided to discontinue its operations because it was not confident that it could meet GDPR requirements. Stopping small voluntary organisations from helping people is not the intention of this legislation. Indeed, if that is an unintended consequence, we need urgently to find ways to remedy it.

Similarly, we need to make sure that this legislation facilitates, rather than damages, our ability to use NHS data effectively. I know that many are working very hard on that, and that everyone is mindful of previous false starts. In particular, the shadow of Care.data still looms, because, despite good intentions, that programme clearly got it wrong. It failed to win public trust: there was widespread concern that the appropriate safeguards were not in place, and a failure properly to explain potential benefits to patients. It is easy to criticise, but winning trust is a very hard thing to do. The public are rightly concerned that data obtained for one use could then be applied in a different context and could possibly be commercialised. All the evidence is that that is what people particularly revile. We now have another programme under way, which we are told is GDPR compliant, and yet I wonder again just how many people are aware of it and whether we can be sure that this work will not be the cause of further problems. I hope that, as we discuss this Bill, we can help raise public awareness and understanding, because without that, all the work and effort being put in by so many could be at risk.

I turn briefly to potential impacts on the research sector and universities. I am grateful to the Sanger Institute, located outside Cambridge, and the Wellcome Trust for explaining some of the very real concerns facing the sector, particularly around health data. We know that reviews such as Caldicott have made sensible recommendations, which hon. Members are working hard to get on the statute book. The principle of opt-outs regarding the usage of data collected is sound, and the safeguards such as those enshrined in GDPR are vital for ensuring data subjects’ interests are protected in research. However, as currently drafted, the framework for data processing by the Government, which was introduced at a very late stage in the other place, risks undermining that. The ICO also has concerns, as it is not clear that the public can have absolute confidence in the way that the Government use their data, and I hope that we can have some clarity from Ministers over how that can be resolved. It is also worth noting in passing that the introduction of the National Data Guardian for Health and Social Care, which has come about through a private Member’s Bill, is welcome but is awaiting Committee stage. The process needs to be speeded up to dovetail with this Bill as a matter of urgency.

There are further concerns. Research institutions tell me that this Bill currently does not provide a clear enough legal basis for conducting research using personal data. They have some fairly straightforward suggestions for improvement, which I hope the Government will consider in Committee, around better defining public interest to make it explicit that it includes research uses, particularly medical research.

Additionally, when I spoke to the Sanger Institute, which has to process data not under the public interest category but under legitimate interest, it was clear to me that it is important that it has confidence about the legitimate provenance of the processed data that it uses, which has often been passed from universities. The research community needs it written explicitly in the
Bill that university research can be conducted legitimately on a “task in the public interest” lawful basis. That is also needed to satisfy guidance from the ICO to confirm that this is an appropriate lawful basis for university research. Although larger institutions may have the confidence to continue with their research and risk challenge, this could present more of a problem to newer or smaller universities. We have huge potential for healthcare transformation and innovation in the UK economy, and to risk that by getting this part of the Bill wrong would be very foolish.

Let me conclude by returning to where I and the GDPR began— with our relationship with the European Union and the extent to which this Bill will or will not help us secure the adequacy agreement that we all agree that we need and that the Prime Minister confirmed that we needed on Friday. Why does it matter? I urge Members to look no further than the excellent work done by techUK, which has explained in detail just how much our economy depends on data flows. Let me share a local example. A few weeks ago, I visited Jagex, a video games developer in my constituency. It was not my first visit. It is a fantastic and inspiring example of what work might be like in the future, and its model is very positive. Visiting Jagex, with representatives from Ukie, the trade body for the video games sector, it was explained to me just how vital data flows are for the sector. It is because these games and their players span many nations, and their data does not respect national boundaries.

On a Friday afternoon, 100,000 people were playing RuneScape—I was told that, over the weekend, there would be more than a million players. Huge flows of data are serviced and maintained by skilled staff in Cambridge, who are from all over Europe and beyond. That is the future, and it is a good future, but it requires that we keep open those flows of data, and—although this is for another day— those flows of people. None the less, we are potentially putting this UK success story at risk. Some of the national security and immigration exemptions in this Bill are potentially enough to deny us data adequacy in the eyes of some countries in the EU. We need to ensure that this Bill is not going to cause us harm further down the line.

There is also the question of timing. These are complicated and controversial issues, but the Bill must be on the statute book in a mere two months’ time— on 6 May—for the new rules to be in place for 25 May. Missing the GDPR implementation date really is not a great look for a country that is trying to achieve a data adequacy agreement with its international partners.

We may also need to assess other countries for their adequacy. Who is to do that assessment? The ICO does not feel that it is appropriate for it to do that, so is the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport really ready? Does it have the resources? Has the work started? And what of the complexities of the relationship with the United States of America and the privacy shield? At the moment, we are covered by the data privacy shield as an EU member state and a similar arrangement would be welcome, but the American system is complicated, with no federal oversight and it may not be quick.

I welcome this Bill overall, but significant challenges remain. I look forward to seeing how the Bill will be improved in Committee, particularly around safeguarding data owners’ rights, ensuring that we can make best use of our health data, and ensuring that universities and researchers have the clarity that they need to continue their excellent and life-saving research.

I hope that the Minister will go further to explain the ways in which she is preparing for adequacy decisions that may need to be both applied for and made by the UK in the coming months and years. Most importantly, perhaps, I hope to learn further from Ministers how this Bill will be adapted so that our approach to the balance between privacy and security is sufficiently aligned with EU standards, meaning that adequacy can be achieved smoothly. I am afraid that “ambitious managed divergence” simply will not cut it, and I leave the Minister to explain how the conundrum can be resolved.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a genuine pleasure to speak under your chairmanship after your absence, Mr Deputy Speaker. Welcome back; it is lovely to see you here.

I was a journalist for 17 years: five with the local press, two with the local media and ending up with 10 years at the BBC. I therefore have an interest in this debate, particularly in the Lords amendments, with which I entirely disagree.

In my very brief speech—time is pressing—I would like to take the House back to the royal charter. Everyone in the House will remember that all parties agreed at the time that, as a consequence of the phone hacking, there should be a royal charter. I have been in this place only seven years so I am still a whippersnapper in that sense, but I have always been very concerned when parties on both sides of the House agree with something. It normally means that something is dramatically wrong. Fifteen MPs voted against the royal charter. I and 14 others realised that there was some state control or state implication that would interfere with the free press. We were not happy with that, so we voted against it.

The key point—a point that I have yet to hear from any party on either side of the House—is that phone hacking is illegal. People are not allowed to do it, and some journalists have found out that it is done. Now, I do not want to take away from those who have suffered or the victims of phone hacking, including the royal family, of course. It was simply appalling. As a former—I would like to think—honourable journalist I personally never took part in that activity; nor did I know anyone who did. This is another point: phone hacking was done by a tiny minority of journalists, who were wrong and who caused immense damage to the reputation of the press in this country.

In my very humble opinion, the press in this country is one of the cornerstones of our freedom and democracy. As I have discovered in the short time that I have been here, when we tinker with legislation it is all too often a huge sledgehammer to crack a nut. Those who are introducing legislation and those who are debating it often do not think about its consequences. What would happen if we started to impede and encroach on the freedom of the press? The press understandably reacted with anger, claiming that the royal charter would destroy local papers who simply could not afford it. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) said—this is true and quite extraordinary—section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 forced newspapers
that had not signed up to a state-supported regulator to pay their own and, indeed, their opponent’s legal costs in libel cases, even if they won the case. That is not freedom of the press. It is not even fair law. It is bad law, made on the back of a terrible wrong committed by a very few people in what is generally, across the world, a highly respected business or profession—that is, the press in this country.

I have been the victim of some pretty interesting press reporting. I confess that I have been trying to put some solar panels on my land. I remember that one columnist in the Daily Mail wrote a double-page spread that was inaccurate. Having read it, I felt as though I had almost murdered someone. I was somehow this appalling landowner who wanted to do these appalling things. I had imposed my will on my tenants, crushed debate and all these things, but none of it was true. In fact, the opposite had been true and always is in that case. To be fair, the paper did ask me for a comment but I knew that, were I to comment, it would be a small piece at the bottom right of the article, and that the other two and a half, three or four columns would all be anti-Drax. But I can live with that because I want a free press in this country. I want a free press to hold us, businesses and powerful people—yes, like Mr Mosley—to account. If I were in the wrong, the press would have a right to dig out of me what I had done wrong, even though I might not want them to do so.

Andy Slaughter: Does the hon. Gentleman think that people such as the McCanns, Milly Dowler’s family and Christopher Jefferies should live with the consequences of being traduced and victimised by the press? Does he not feel that casting the press as the victims, when we know that they are actually controlled by a small number of extremely wealthy and irresponsible individuals, is putting things exactly upside down?

Richard Drax: Forgive me, I did not quite hear the first part of the hon. Gentleman’s question, but I think that I got the general gist. The point about multimillion pound media barons is a red herring. I have worked in many media institutions, including newspapers and other organisations, and those people do not get involved. We were left very much to our own devices to report accurately, fairly and truthfully. Yes, they may be very wealthy, but good luck to them. They—or their fathers or grandfathers—have worked extremely hard to build up a business that employs tens of thousands of people in this country.

The point must again be made that the online media barons is a red herring. I have worked in many media institutions, including newspapers and other organisations, and those people do not get involved. We were left very much to our own devices to report accurately, fairly and truthfully. Yes, they may be very wealthy, but good luck to them. They—or their fathers or grandfathers—have worked extremely hard to build up a business that employs tens of thousands of people in this country.

The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), who I seem to recall told us that there was no money left, groans from a sedentary position. Online, anyone can say what they want, and they do. There is no recourse for the many thousands of victims of online abuse, intimidation and threats—threats to kill. What comeback is there for them? Nothing at all. That is where I urge the Government to look very carefully to ensure that the online media face the same standards that the national press would face.

I am not going to keep the House waiting much longer, because others want to speak. It is my view—along with others, I would think—that only then would anger, revenge, or even guilt in their heart would support these amendments and damage a free press, which is the cornerstone of our democracy. The Leader of the Opposition wants to crush the press; I think, “We’re coming for you” is what he said. No, that is not what the British people want and they certainly will not vote for it. A free press is all important.

7.58 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who gave an excellent speech a few minutes ago, I will focus my remarks on the data protection aspects of the Bill. The Minister will have seen the press report this morning on research carried out by the Federation of Small Businesses showing that fewer than one in 10 small businesses is fully prepared for the obligations that this legislation imposes on them, and just under one in five has not yet heard of the GDPR. These obligations all take effect at the end of May—in less than three months’ time—so whatever the merits of this Bill, there is clearly a huge amount of work to be done in drawing the attention of those affected to what it means.

Ministers have made some changes to the Bill during its passage through the other place since we last discussed it in this Chamber on 12 October. In that debate, I and others made the point that my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tim Watson) made earlier—that leaving article 8 of the European charter of fundamental rights outside UK law poses a serious threat to our achieving a data adequacy determination from the European Commission in future. I therefore welcome the addition of what is now clause 2, which partly addresses that. However, I do not think it goes far enough, so I will be supporting my hon. Friend’s proposal that article 8 should be added to our statute book. Lord Stevenson tabled an amendment in the other place that said:

“The protection of personal data may not be lawfully restricted or limited unless such restrictions and limitations are consistent with the principle of proportionality.”

That is an important additional protection that ought to be in the Bill. I hope that we will be able to debate that amendment in Committee.

There is some confusion in the Government about all this. The Secretary of State set out how important it is that we keep our UK data regulation aligned with the regulation in the European Union because of the importance to the UK economy of personal data transfers between the UK and the EU. He is absolutely right about that. However, in recent months, the Foreign Secretary and the International Trade Secretary have suggested from time to time that it would be a good thing if the UK could deviate from EU rules on data protection. Last July, for example, the International Trade Secretary said in the United States—I am quoting from a report in the Financial Times—that the UK was more in line with US calls for information to be allowed to flow freely across borders while Germany and other EU countries insist on localisation. He was getting a bit confused about two different things, but he is clearly suggesting in that remark, as in others, that it could be a good thing for the UK to deviate from EU data protection rules. In fact—the Secretary of State is absolutely right about this—it would be a disaster for the UK to deviate from EU data protection regulation, because if the EU were to judge our data protection rules to be inadequate, a large chunk of the UK economy would immediately be without any lawful basis. That could affect exactly the kind of innovative company to which my hon. Friend
the Member for Cambridge drew attention—a games company with players all over Europe who, as a part of playing the game, need to be able to send personal data between their country and the European Union.

Matt Hancock: The right hon. Gentleman has made this point in these debates several times, and I want to reassure him on the Government’s precise position. I stated this in my remarks, not speaking from notes, but let me read to him what the Prime Minister said in her speech on Friday:

“we will be seeking more than just an adequacy arrangement and want to see an appropriate ongoing role for the UK’s Information Commissioner’s Office. This will ensure UK businesses are effectively represented under the EU’s new ‘one stop shop’ mechanism for resolving data protection disputes.”

So there you have it.

Stephen Timms: I am grateful to the Secretary of State, and I welcome that commitment on the part of the Prime Minister.

The problem is, however, that the International Trade Secretary and the Foreign Secretary have been saying different. That led to techUK, the industry body, writing to the International Trade Secretary last month to highlight the dangers. This was reported by that reliable publication, The Daily Telegraph, on 19 February, with the headline: “Tech industry warns Ministers not to drop EU security laws”. The report began:

“The British tech industry has issued a stark warning to leading Brexiteer ministers that diverging from EU data protection standards after Brexit will ‘undermine’ the UK’s status as Europe’s leading tech hub.”

The Secretary of State is absolutely right not to have gone down the same road as his right hon. Friends, and I very much welcome what the Prime Minister said about all this on Friday. However, there is clearly a problem in the Cabinet. I gather that after sending that letter, techUK received a reassuring response from the Department, and then a few days later a non-executive director at the Department for International Trade was quoted as saying, “Complying with EU standards on data is not the only solution.” But the truth is that for a large part of the UK economy, it is the only solution. We need to be absolutely clear about this. I am delighted that the Secretary of State is clear about it. Of course, that is why he is bringing this Bill before us and why he has altered it in line with what a number of us said in October.

Matt Hancock: I hate to take the wind out of the right hon. Gentleman’s sails, but it was unusual to receive that letter from techUK, because rarely as a Minister have I been lobbied so strongly in support of my own position.

Stephen Timms: I am glad that the Secretary of State has been lobbied in support of his own position, but he needs to watch his back against Ministers who lack the clarity that he has expressed—particularly the International Trade Secretary and the Foreign Secretary, who continue to say that there is merit in divergence. There is no merit in divergence at all. Significant numbers of tech start-ups are already going to Berlin rather than basing themselves in the UK because of the uncertainty about this issue. The more uncertainty there is, fanned by some members of the Cabinet, the greater the economic damage to the UK.

This is a very clear example of the situation we are going to find ourselves in more and more when we have left the European Union. It will be asserted that because of our economic interests, in this case, we should comply with rules drawn up by the European Union—in this case, the general data protection regulation—but we will no longer have a vote about what those rules should be. We will become a rule-taker. I welcome the commitment that the Prime Minister has made to a place for the UK’s Information Commissioner on the European data protection board. That will be helpful. It means that we will at least get a voice in these discussions when the rules are being drawn up—but we will not get a vote. We will be less influential in EU data protection laws than we have been as members of the European Union. We need to recognise that our influence, including over laws that we are going to have to implement ourselves, will be less in future than it has been up to now.

I would very much welcome the Minister telling us—my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge made this point as well—how, in future, we are going to make adequacy determinations about other countries’ data protection laws. Are we going to adopt the EU list and say that those 12 countries are adequate and others are not, or are we going to have our own processes? How is it going to be done?

I echo the concerns expressed by a number of Members about the threats to our future data adequacy determination that come from the immigration exemption and the national security exemption. Those were not well defended by Ministers in the debates in the other place, and the justification for them is not clear. As others have said, they leave us open to criticisms of our data protection regulations that could threaten our future adequacy determinations. I am very keen to hear the Minister’s response to those concerns in particular.

8.9 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms).

As we prepare to leave the European Union, this country is committed to remaining a global leader on data protection. Data flows are important for the UK and the EU economies, and we recognise the need for safeguards. The Bill is important in both promoting the flow of information sharing and protecting individuals’ personal data, while complying with the EU framework. It will ensure that our domestic data protection rules are aligned with our economic partners at the point of exit from the EU.

I welcome the measured response of the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) to the Bill. While I agree that a balance must always be maintained between press freedom and the freedom of the individual, the amendments passed by the House of Lords are a direct threat to press freedom. This Government want to ensure that the press is well regulated and has high standards. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), who is no longer in his place, said, the amendments would do damage. Newspaper circulation continues to decline.

Christine Jardine: Would the hon. Gentleman contend that in the pursuit of press freedom, we should also do away with contempt of court and libel? That, to me, as a former journalist, is equivalent to suggesting that we
should overturn the House of Lords amendments. The press is already regulated, and those regulations are important. It is important that we continue to ensure that we have a responsible press.

**Colin Clark:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I have great respect for her, having debated with her on many occasions as we both tried to get elected to this place. I think that the amendments go a lot further than that and will do damage, and that is the crux of it.

Leveson 2 is unnecessary and would be backward-looking, as other Members have said. Regulation has moved on. The rise of digital news has led to the closure of hundreds of local newspapers, and commencing section 40 would threaten their fragile financial viability even more. The venerable newspapers in my own area—*The Press and Journal* and *The Courier* in Dundee—are important to the north-east of Scotland, but their sales have dropped by 10%. Section 40 would be calamitous to those papers. Local papers will become more important as we devolve powers to local communities, which we want to do. The *Huntly Express* and the advertisers, which have carried many stories on the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and myself over the years, would be undermined and threatened. We cannot see that happen if we want local democracy to continue.

Politicians deciding how newspapers should behave is a direct threat to our democracy, of which a free national and local press is an essential component. The data protection regulator, the Information Commissioner’s Office, will go a long way to defend consumer interests and the burden on businesses will be reduced. The UK is glad to hear the Secretary of State reassure us that the burden on businesses will be reduced. The UK is important to the north-east of Scotland, but their sales have dropped by 10%. Section 40 would be calamitous to those papers. Local papers will become more important as we devolve powers to local communities, which we want to do. The *Huntly Express* and the advertisers, which have carried many stories on the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and myself over the years, would be undermined and threatened. We cannot see that happen if we want local democracy to continue.

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8.12 pm

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), I broadly welcome the Bill and its aims. A strong data protection framework is essential for the protection of human rights, particularly the right to privacy. Having a strong data protection framework is also key to the granting of adequacy by the EU Commission following the UK’s exit from the European Union, which of course I very much regret. However, the Bill falls short in the protections it provides in a number of areas, many of which have been ably outlined by my hon. Friend.

I want to focus on the immigration exception. Many of my hon. Friends and I have had emails from constituents who are particularly concerned about it. I am indebted to the Bar Council and the Immigration Law Practitioners Association for the briefings they have provided. Like others, they have pointed out, as I said in my intervention on the Secretary of State, that paragraph 4 of part 1 of schedule 2, which provides for the immigration exemption, is not reflective of the stated permissible exemptions under article 23 of the GDPR. If the Bill goes ahead unamended, it could cause us great problems for any finding of adequacy when we leave the European Union.

If enacted, that exemption will allow the Home Office, for the purposes of immigration control, to deny individuals access to their personal data—information that people can currently access by making a subject access request. The availability of that information is often vital to the fairness of legal proceedings in which individuals need to enforce or protect their rights. For example, for an individual effectively to challenge detention or an unlawful decision by the Home Office, or to make an application for immigration or asylum, they need to understand their own immigration history and to know what information the Home Office holds about them.

This is the information on which claims and legal challenges are often based. When both sides do not have access to the same information, the fairness of legal proceedings is inevitably compromised. Subject access requests are the only route through which legal practitioners can obtain access to that information and understand what are often complicated immigration histories. We all, as Members of Parliament, have experience of complicated immigration histories of people who come to see us in our surgeries. The reality is that many of these people do not have access to the relevant documents, or an accurate recollection or legal understanding of their circumstances. These concerns are not fanciful; they are very real.

To give an example, when someone is held in detention, they do not have access to their paperwork, for obvious reasons. They need their solicitor to be able to make a request to the Home Office to get the necessary information. Another important example is applicants who have been the victims of domestic violence, who have often been controlled by their partners for years. We introduced legislation in Scotland recently to deal with coercive control and recognise it as a real problem in domestic abuse. When a woman, or indeed a man, has been the subject of coercive control for many years before seeking help with immigration matters, a subject access request may be the only way of establishing the basis of any application for settlement and of obtaining independence from an abusive partner.

**Sir Edward Davey:** I am grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for giving way; she is making an excellent speech. Is it not ironic that the Government are planning to consult on improving protections for women who are the victims of domestic violence, but in the Bill they are taking protections away from some of the most vulnerable of them?

**Joanna Cherry:** Indeed it is ironic, and actions speak louder than words. I will certainly raise that matter with the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who very recently has offered to meet me to discuss legislation that the Government have in mind about domestic abuse.

Those are just two examples of when it is very important for legal advisers to be able to make a subject access request to the Home Office and not to be met by the sort of brick wall that this immigration exemption, if enacted, would allow. I say “just two examples” because the Immigration Law Practitioners Association has produced, in an annexe to its briefing, a large number of real-life cases that illustrate the very wide range of circumstances in which subject access requests are used and are essential.

It is a sad fact that the Home Office has a well catalogued track record of making unlawful decisions. In a recent answer to a House of Lords question,
the other place was told that in the 10 years to 2015, 250,000 appeals were allowed against the Home Office. Allowing the Home Office an exemption from subject access requests in immigration matters will have the effect of insulating the Government from challenges to unlawful decision making, and that is just not right. The Home Office does not apply the law as it has been mandated to by Parliament—or with the consistency that it should. That is why it loses so many cases in the courts.

We often come to the House to hear criticisms of Home Office procedures. While we cannot rectify those procedures under the auspices of the Bill, what we can do is not allow the status quo to get any worse. I exhort the Government to remove this exemption from the Bill, particularly as there are other exemptions in it that the immigration authorities can seek to rely on for the processing of personal data in accordance with their statutory duties and functions, or in the case of an offence having been committed.

This broad-ranging exemption will impact substantially on human rights, and it may also impact on an adequacy decision from the European Commission. Indeed, EU citizens today expressed their concern that these exemptions might have an impact on their ability to enforce their residency rights after Brexit, under the agreements currently being brokered. I urge the Government to look at this very carefully. They have yet to give any reasonable justification for the inclusion in the Bill of this very broad exemption, and I look forward to hearing one, if it is brought forward.

I share the concerns that led to amendments being passed by the Lords, and the cross-party concerns expressed in this House last week when the Government announced their decision to renege on the commitment to hold the second part of the Leveson inquiry. I was very glad to hear the points of order earlier on what Sir Brian Leveson actually said in his letter about his desire for Leveson part 2 to go forward.

I am not convinced by the reasons given by the Government for their decision to ditch any plans for Leveson 2. I endorse what the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said in this House last week: he said that Members “should be able to speak without fear or favour.”—[Official Report, 1 March 2018; Vol. 636, c. 971.]

That principle is as important as the freedom of the press, because the need for Members of Parliament to speak without fear or favour comes from the same right as the freedom of the press: the right to free speech and freedom of expression. I am sorry to have to say that I believe that the UK Government have acted out of fear of the press barons, and through fear, because so many of those press barons share their narrow right-wing agenda. There have been many genuine victims of press abuse, from grieving parents—everyone knows whom I am speaking about—to the relatives of those who died in the Hillsborough disaster, and they deserve better than this.

My hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute made it very clear that it is not acceptable that the House of Lords should seek to legislate on matters devolved to Scotland; previously, section 40 applied only to England and Wales. As this is a devolved matter, what happens on press regulation in Scotland is for the Scottish Parliament. Although my colleagues in the Scottish Government have no plans to legislate in this area at the moment, there is debate within the SNP, as in the other political parties, about the best way to ensure that the terrible abuses uncovered by Leveson do not happen again.

In this House, promises were made by the UK Government to implement Leveson’s recommendations, and suspicions have rightly been raised about the motivation for the U-turn in the Conservative party manifesto—a U-turn that was completed with last week’s announcement. It is important to be clear that this is a volte-face on a previous cross-party agreement. I have yet to be convinced that there is not still the same need for the section 40 legislation, and I have previously tried to debunk some of the myths when I have spoken about it in this House.

Let us not sweep these issues under the carpet—let us have a full and frank debate about them—but we should not let the Leveson issues completely dominate the debate about the Data Protection Bill, because it covers very important issues beyond Leveson, of which I have mentioned only one: the immigration exemption. I look forward to debating these matters further as the Bill progresses through the House.

8.23 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I am delighted to take part in this debate on the Data Protection Bill, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry).

In my brief contribution, I will focus mostly on amendment 147, passed by the other place, which would implement section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act in relation to data protection. I am pleased that the Government will seek to overturn it. If it remained, it would be a huge blow to each and every local newspaper in the Scottish borders in my constituency. Under the provision, all newspapers and magazines not signed up to the state-approved regulator would be liable to pay for the other side’s costs in an action for a breach of data protection, whether they win or lose the case. As data touches on virtually every aspect of journalism, a legal action relating to almost any action by our press could be dressed up in a way that would take advantage of this provision.

For all publishers in the Scottish borders, this could have serious consequences. The recently set up Hawick Paper or the community-run Eskdale & Liddesdale Advertiser could not afford to risk a case going to court, given the crippling costs that might be involved. They would have to stop investigating a story, or print an apology for something that was actually true. The alternative would be going to court and possibly paying the costs, even if they were successful. Even the titles backed by the Johnston Press machinery in the borders, such as The Southern Reporter and The Berwickshire News, could face closure if any claims were brought against them. Johnston Press recently announced significant losses, and any further setbacks might result in the loss of further local titles, not just in my constituency, but in many other parts of Scotland. It would be the same for the Borders Telegraph, which covers another part of my constituency in the Scottish borders.
I find myself in the rather, if not extremely, odd position—this might be the only time I can say this—of agreeing with Nicola Sturgeon. Last year, she said in relation to section 40:

“I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that it would threaten the viability of local newspapers.”

The purpose of the Attlee amendment was to incentivise media operators to sign up to press control in respect of data protection claims. This may well be a laudable aim, but section 40 is a clumsy way of achieving it, and amendment 147 was not the appropriate vehicle to address what is a much wider issue, not restricted to data protection.

This Bill is concerned with modernising data protection laws, not press regulation, and there is much to be found in this Bill that is welcome. It is certainly time, in this digital age, for an update of our legislation. Much of the Bill implements the EU’s general data protection regulation, which the UK helped to shape. By adopting it in domestic law, we ensure that businesses are able to operate across international borders as we leave the European Union. We have also exercised our right to derogate from the GDPR on key areas, such as the age of consent and freedom of expression in the media. I believe it strikes the right balance between individual protection and allowing the free flow of data.

I therefore welcome the Bill, and I particularly welcome the intention of the Government to reverse the amendments made in the other place, which I believe would in effect derogate from the GDPR on key areas, such as the age of consent and freedom of expression in the media. I agree with Nicola Sturgeon. Last year, she said in relation to section 40:

“if Brexit will happen—yet to my knowledge we have not debated the GDPR or its interpretation in this House. I assume that we will have that opportunity when we consider the GDPR statutory instrument under the withdrawal Bill process.

Other issues include the e-privacy regulation, which is currently stuck in trilogue in the EU; the implementation of the network and information security directive to address cyber-security breaches; and the establishment and purpose of the data ethics unit in the Minister’s Department, a body whose work I hope the House will be able to lead that debate with the public. Technology Committee a few weeks ago, when she suggested that the new data ethics unit could be the place for public debate about what the public find acceptable in this new, fourth industrial revolution, and that it should not take on enforcement powers, which the ICO currently has. I hope that this place, as well as that unit, will be able to lead that debate with the public.

There are many issues that warrant debate—I look forward to rehearsing them in Committee—ranging from the requirement for human intervention in the use of automated decision-making algorithms, which is something that I and other hon. Members on the Science and Technology Committee have been looking at in detail, to the application of the law to newly defined processes such as the re-identification of pseudonymous data and the public policy requirements to protect children online, not just from criminal issues but from commercial exploitation, through to powers of collective redress for citizens who might not feel able to bring forward complaints or claims of their own. There are also, of course, other important issues, such as whether the Secretary of State has appointed his own data protection officer for the Matt Hancock app.
Sadly, time does not permit that debate today, so I will focus my final remarks on some issues around the most important process of getting an adequacy decision from the European Commission. First, and in line with the Prime Minister’s latest views that she gave us from the Dispatch Box today, we must be honest about the need to comply with EU law in the future, because to maintain our finding of adequacy, we must continue to be adequate. The European Commission does not take a snap-shot view and say we are adequate for ever more, but will make an ongoing assessment of our compliance.

That means implementing the decisions of the European data protection board, which is subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. I hope that Ministers will not say that we will not comply with those decisions, because we would risk failing to win our adequacy decision. Although I agree with the Government’s aim of securing a seat at the table of the data protection board for our Information Commissioner, as she said to me at our Select Committee a few weeks ago, third-country representatives have little influence and, of course, no vote. As a Canadian, she knows that well from her previous work. We must therefore be honest in saying that we will continue to apply EU law as it comes from the European data protection board but that we will have no seat at the table in defining it.

To turn to the debate between my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and the Secretary of State about the divergence of views among those on the Treasury Bench, we have seen today that the principle of “America first” will be at the heart of any prospective trade deal with the United States of America, meaning that for agricultural products, for example, the US regulatory framework takes precedence. I hope there is no inclination from the Government, in trying to seek a digital trade deal with the United States, to go for a US-style regulatory framework rather than one with the European Union.

Secondly, there are serious concerns about the Government’s powers under the Bill—from their ability to self-legislate derogations for themselves for extremely broad reasons, such as the exercise of their “official authority”, which I think means “anything at all”, to the ability of various Departments to share personal data without citizens’ knowledge, such as by using pupil, medical or police data for the again broadly defined purposes of “immigration control”, which has been mentioned frequently in this debate.

Lastly, there is the issue of national security. The case in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East brought a challenge against the Government’s bulk collection of data powers under the predecessor legislation to the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. Interestingly, that case relied on rights in the privacy directive, which we are not discussing today, and articles 7 and 8 of the EU charter of fundamental rights, which the Government seek to abdicate under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. I hope the data framework that we establish will not prevent such further challenges against national security measures.

The Government seemed to anticipate the application of the ECJ ruling by the Court of Appeal in the case of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East and others and consulted last November on what amendments were needed to the Investigatory Powers Act to bring it into compliance with the ECJ ruling. In my view, the Government’s position seeks merely to make the case that this whole conversation is one of national security and therefore irrelevant to the European Union. However, as the Schrems case shows, the overall data protection culture of a third country, including its powers of mass surveillance for national security purposes—itself not an EU competence—will be taken into account by the European Commission when deciding on advocacy.

I hope the Minister has a clear answer for the House about how the Government seek to remove fundamental rights, while balancing them to seek adequacy, and whether she has any further insight into what the Prime Minister meant today by getting something “beyond adequacy”. I am a man of definitions and I have been somewhat confused. The Secretary of State previously talking for something akin to adequacy, and I believe that what we need is adequacy. The Prime Minister is now talking about “beyond adequacy”. It would be useful to have clarity on what those terms mean.

Finally, let me make a short comment about Leveson 2. I might understand a Government’s intention to dilute regulations for the regulation of the press that they see as too restrictive—something, I should add, that I disagree with—but I find it extremely hard to understand how a Government with any heart can decide with such haste and disrespect to bring to a close the ability for people who have been victims of press intrusion to seek clarity and justice. That seems both heartless and unnecessary, albeit perhaps politically expedient. I hope the Government reconsider their position on that most important matter.

8.36 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I intend to speak only briefly, as this is a strong Bill that will empower people to take control of their data. I am pleased to see such broad support for it receiving its Second Reading, but I am not able to support the provisions in the Bill that would implement section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. It seems that I am one of the few Members speaking in this debate who has not had to declare an interest as a former journalist—unless, Madam Deputy Speaker, you count four days’ work experience with the Stourbridge News 25 years ago, just to put that on record. A lack of journalistic experience, however, does not mean not understanding or appreciating the importance of a strong and free media for our political, community and social lives.

The relationship between politicians and the media ought to be uneasy. It is safe to say that the press and the media more broadly can be something of a pain in the neck. On occasions, that sensation may be felt in an area a little lower down, and I know that from personal experience. Shortly after I was elected, I stayed at the Carlton hotel at the back of Victoria station. No one could describe it as luxurious, yet The Guardian reported this as claiming on expenses to stay at the Ritz. If I could negotiate a room at the Ritz for £119 a night, I feel that the Prime Minister might find a role for me in the current negotiations. Clearly, people will have different levels at which they feel the need to respond to such inaccurate claims.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman says that some sections of the media can be a pain in the neck. No one should take
exception to that. Setting aside any pains anywhere, the problem many of us have is that on occasions some sections of the media are exceptionally unfair. They do not seek balance and the result is that the debate is not set to the best interests of the various parts of any debate. That is why many of us have a problem, particularly with the broadcast media, including certain sections that we pay for.

Mike Wood: I understand exactly the hon. Gentleman's point, with which I have a little sympathy. However, when the media are behaving unfairly and something is inaccurate, distorted or misleading, it is of course right that there are proper procedures for redress. I have absolutely no problem with greater access to justice, but, on the measure's own terms, it would fail in this regard.

Clearly, the hope is that the proposal would somehow pressure the media into signing up to a state-approved regulator, but for those who remain outside such a system, changing the basis for awarding costs would not improve access to justice. It would not prevent our libel and defamation laws from being the preserve of the already rich and powerful. All it would do is deter proper, quality investigative journalism. It would deter community and local reporting, where, shall we say, conflict within communities is not unheard of. If, when a claim is brought, there is an assumption—not quite but almost without regard to the merits of the case or who the claimant is—that the defendant will have the costs awarded against them, that is an enormous disincentive to continue with a story, even when doing so is clearly in the public interest. It must be the case, when there is criminal behaviour and when something is actionable—

Liam Byrne: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Wood: I am just concluding. When something is criminal, the full weight of the law should fall on those who break it. When something is actionable, we need streamlined procedures that actually work—an array of alternatives, not just the one-trick pony in this proposal. However, when publishers are confident that their story is accurate, fair and proportionate, the only proper response is to publish and be damned.

8.42 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood). It is fair to say that my party broadly supports much of this Bill, which is a vital component in our continued and smooth co-operation with the EU. Should Brexit go ahead, but that support is not without qualification, which I shall come to shortly. As an EU member, we are assumed to be compliant with the requirements of the Union, but as a third party we will be required to demonstrate a suitable standard of protections. Failure to do this would jeopardise the co-operation that even the most zealous Brexiteers, I should imagine, want to maintain in defence and security.

The Data Protection Bill and the general data protection regulation bring existing best practice into law. This is not an onerous burden; it is a natural progression for information rights in the digital age. However, we have reservations about some aspects that we will discuss later. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) intends to speak about the proposed immigration exemptions. I had intended to concentrate on areas that deal with our personal data and the help that industry and charity organisations will need to cope with this regulation, but as the debate has progressed, I have become increasingly concerned about the Government’s intention to overturn the amendment by the House of Lords. The Data Protection Bill is an important vehicle through which to bring forward recommendations from the Leveson inquiry, as this House promised to do. Data processing for investigative journalism purposes must strike a balance between press freedom and the individual’s right to privacy.

As a journalist, I value freedom of speech and freedom of the press as much as any other person. As a journalist, I was always impressed by and proud of colleagues who uncovered miscarriages of justice, political corruption or malpractice in India, for example. The freedom of the press to scrutinise and hold to account those in power—as the hon. Member for Dudley South said, the relationship between journalists and politicians should not be an easy one—is vital in a democracy. It must not, however, be at the cost of the individual—to their privacy in times of grief or hardship, to their hard-won personal and professional reputations—or mean chasing them when they have done nothing wrong other than perhaps disagree with the stance of a newspaper. That cannot be the way.

Newspapers in this country are not free of regulation. Broadcasting has to apply the standards set by Ofcom. Newspapers have to abide by the law of libel, contempt of court and the criminal code. All those things are necessary, but in an increasingly digital age it is necessary to ensure that all publications abide by data protection regulations. It is more than 20 years since Calcutt warned the press that they were drinking in the last chance saloon. Well, they had their drink and frankly they have been thrown out. The Press Council failed; the Press Complaints Commission failed; and this House promised to bring forward a statute underpinning body. Self-regulation with statutory underpinning—it is good enough for every other industry, it is good enough for the Law Society, so why are we not prepared to follow through for the press? The vast majority of journalists are honourable. As the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) said, we are talking about a small minority, but that small minority can do immense damage to individual’s lives—we saw it with the McCanns, with Milly Dowler and with the Hillsborough inquiry—and it is not good enough for us to say they are doing a good enough job; they patently are not, which is why I hope the House will uphold the amendments passed in the other place.

I turn now to what I had intended to speak about: the rights of individuals and the problem many have in talking about data and regulation. It sounds like a technical issue—something that does not affect them directly in their everyday lives. Algorithms are a mystery that many of us have no desire to investigate, never mind solve, yet they are a major influence in our increasingly technology-driven and social media-driven lives. Data harvesting can sneak into every corner of our existence, undertaken by public and private organisations—those we deal with and many that just want to deal with us, or those who know what they know about us. The information we provide tells them how to sell us everything from cars and mortgages to life insurance and funerals. As more and more information about our daily lives is digitally recorded,
it is important that individuals have more control. With the passing of the Bill, we should all be able to rest assured that the information is being used both ethically and responsibly, including by the national and regional press, and that we have access to ensure that it is accurate, whether it is available to individuals or public or private bodies.

We should take into account that the information we provide can be used to infer information we have not given. For example, I am reliably informed that people who like curly fries are more likely to have high IQs. If someone was to pass on that culinary preference with their data, floods of adverts aimed at highly intelligent curly fries fans would be likely to follow. Occasionally, of course, it can all go wrong. Just after suffering a recent bereavement, I was in touch with a nationally known undertaker. Immediately afterwards, I was bombarded with adverts about planning for my own funeral, which is not really what anyone in that position wants. That is just an illustration of why it is important to the public that they have the right to view and correct or delete their own personal data, as laid out in the Bill. None of us wants false information out there about us that could prejudice decisions or jeopardise our security.

That, surely, is particularly important in relation to the many young people—a significant number of them children—who are regularly online. Ofcom estimates that 99% of under-16s are online for nearly 21 hours a week. The Children's Society and YoungMinds surveyed more than 1,000 young people about their online experiences, both generally and more specifically with regard to cyber-bullying, and found that 61% of the under-18s who were surveyed had had their first experience of social media before the age of 13.

In setting the age of consent, it is important to be realistic about the lives of young people. Sixteen may not be an appropriate age of consent, or a realistic reflection of a situation in which practice allows only over-13s to have an account, but with no age verification. Young people need to learn their data and privacy rights much earlier, and that should be a mandatory part of their personal, social, health and economic education at school.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): When it comes to the protection of children, there is a greater need for parents and guardians to be involved, but we often find that the care that ought to be there is not there. Has the hon. Lady any thoughts about how we could improve the situation?

Christine Jardine: I believe that parents should take more responsibility, but I think that the answer is to educate the children themselves and make them aware of the danger.

It will be important for the Government to support those who will feel extra strain as a result of the Bill, such as small and medium-sized enterprises and, indeed, the Information Commissioner's Office itself. The ICO will have a much more proactive role in policing data protection matters and will be required to produce masses of guidance both now and after May. The office must be properly resourced to do its important job. There should also be targeted support for charities.

Many sectors—manufacturing, retail, health, information technology and financial services—are anxious for the free flow of data between ourselves and the European Union to continue with minimum disruption post-Brexit. In an increasingly digital economy and society, that is critical for both our international trade and the protection of our rights of privacy. We must get this legislation right, and, as I said earlier, I believe that that will mean upholding the amendments passed in the other place.

8.52 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), not least because my own brief contribution will be simply an extension of the points that she made.

When I first came to this place, I was lucky enough to have dinner with some people from Facebook. We were invited to their headquarters in London and were given an example of how they used data to influence purchasing activity. Facebook knows that elderly people are not frequent users of the site, but that grandparents are keen users just before the birthdays of their grandchildren. Facebook knows everything about us, so of course it knows when our grandchildren's birthdays are, and it probably knows what sort of toys they are interested in and what sort of films they watch. All information of that kind is held. Facebook can start pitching advertisements for appropriate products to people two weeks before their grandchildren's birthdays, even before they themselves know what would interest their grandchildren.

I am not suggesting that we should use the Bill to introduce a tough code of practice to protect grandparents, but given that Facebook holds that data and can manipulate it in such a way, we should certainly protect young children from similar practices. I am concerned about whether 13 is an appropriate age of consent. People might be reassured by the fact that Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp require users to be at least 13, but, as was pointed out earlier, there are no checks to establish that is the case. We should be particularly concerned because there has been an incredible proliferation in the use of mobile devices by young people. Research conducted in 2014 across many countries in Europe and in Japan found that children typically get their first phone at 10 years old. Other research carried out more recently suggests that between 2014 and 2017 there has been a doubling of online use by five to seven-year-olds. It does not matter what the starting point was.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): There are large, global organisations that have data on every single individual through their mobile phones; mass data collection tracks movements and identifies where anyone is at any one time. That information is not even held in the United Kingdom; it is held in California in the United States. How can we ensure that we have access to that information if we need it for security reasons?

Eddie Hughes: I am not sure I am going to be able to answer that excellent point, but I was about to touch on something similar.

Apart from the statistical data that I have alluded to, as we walk around every day we see younger and younger children using mobile devices; they must be protected. Greater protection is perhaps required for the most vulnerable. I have been a councillor on Walsall Council for 18 years and a large proportion of my time
has been spent working with looked-after children and ensuring the services they are provided with are as useful and appropriate to their needs as possible. On the point that the hon. Gentleman has just made, we are talking not just about the collection of our own data as adults, or the collection of the data of young children, but about the collection of the data of the most vulnerable people in society—looked-after children. The collection and use of their data is terrifying if it gets into the wrong hands. I hope the Minister will take this opportunity to ensure that we protect not just the young, but the most vulnerable young in our society from the perils of data collection and manipulation by huge global entities.

8.57 pm

**John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), who characteristically speaks with great clarity without notes, but I shall take inspiration from the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), the first Back Bencher to speak in this debate, in that I will take a slightly different view from my Front-Bench colleagues on a couple of issues. In particular, I will suggest that there are some flaws in clauses 168 and 169.

When I retired from this House in 2010, I never really expected to be back on these Benches, yet I am now back here representing a different constituency. I missed out on the Leveson report and the subsequent debate about Leveson and the provisions of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. I recognise, however, the tremendous hurt caused by phone hacking and the crimes committed by those involved in it; indeed, two dozen-plus people were convicted of crimes at that stage. I recognise, too, the tremendous sense of violation of privacy that people felt at that time. I am also well aware of the force of the charges our Front Benchers put to the Government: that at that stage they committed themselves to legislation that they are now resiling from.

I am also aware that the history of my party’s relations with the press over the last century has not been untroubled. We have rightly stood up for a feeling that the press has felt at that time. I am also well aware of the force of the charges our Front Benchers put to the Government: that at that stage they committed themselves to legislation that they are now resiling from.

We must be very careful about taking this step. We are already 40th in the accepted rankings relating to a free press. We are not even in the top 10, and we should be up there with Norway, which I think is No. 1. We should be very careful about taking these steps. How would Russia Today react if our press organisations were forced into bankruptcy or felt the chilling effect that Alastair Campbell warned against recently?

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very good point. A key concern that I share with him relates to the dwindling number of local titles. In my constituency, the *Stirling Observer* is the only newspaper left serving the community. It has a skeleton staff with very few reporters and very few resources even though it is part of a bigger group, and it is vulnerable because of its dwindling circulation. Anything we can do to strengthen our democracy must involve encouraging freedom of the press.

**John Grogan**: Investigative journalism is one of the things that makes me proud to be British. When I was previously an MP, I was lucky enough to be vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary National Union of Journalists group. At that time, the group had only two other officers that I can remember: my right hon. Friends the Members for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). Obviously, their careers have taken a different path from my own, but I am still proud to be vice-chair of that group, and I think it is right that I should be.

Obviously, the press get many things wrong, but they also get some things right. There have been many investigations, including the *Daily Mail* investigation into the Stephen Lawrence affair. The *Daily Telegraph* has held politicians to account on both sides of the Atlantic; at the moment, it is exposing the possibility that President Trump was financed by foreign contributions. It has also exposed football corruption. Thank goodness for *The Guardian* exposing tax cheats and tax avoidance, and thank goodness for the *Daily Mirror* exposing some of the activities of the tech giants and the more unjustifiable practices of the gig economy. That investigative journalism does not come cheap, however, and I believe that it would be threatened by putting section 40 into law. I have studied the Labour party manifesto very carefully; it is my bedside reading. We are committed to Leveson 2, but I do not think that there is anything in the manifesto that commits us to the implementation of section 40.

I have been looking at the amendments that were passed in the other place, and it is interesting that clause 142, which deals with a potential Leveson 2, is actually more expansive than Leveson 2 in some ways, in that it could affect broadcasters and online services as well as all newspapers. That has to be taken into account when we consider that clause.

I am radical when it comes to the reform of our media and our press. I think that we have forgotten some of the issues on the left of British politics that we used to bring to the forefront. For example, the concentration of ownership in our media is far too great. The right of reply is also something that we should concentrate on, as is the wide variety of issues relating to the power of Facebook, Google and others and their inability to deal with fake news in a convincing way. However, alliances are shifting. This week in *The Sunday Times* I read the most favourable article I have ever read in that newspaper about a speech by a director-general of the BBC. He was talking about the danger posed to British culture, the British way of telling a story and British journalism by the dominance of the tech giants on the west coast of America.

Some things have changed in the media landscape, but I hope that we in this House will always stand up for press freedom and for the plurality of the media. One of the little things that I do in Parliament is also one of the things that I am most proud of, and that is that I chair a number of groups, including groups on Kosovo, Albania and Mongolia. Those are emerging economies and democracies, and we often discuss press freedom in our meetings with people from those countries. How would it look if this House were to impose punitive damages on our newspapers unless they signed up to a state-supported regulator? I think that that would be very difficult to explain.
Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I find myself in a great deal of agreement with the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan), who has put the case for press freedom extremely clearly. I begin by making an essentially ancestral declaration of interest: my father was involved with newspapers for most of his professional life, and I have received by comparison very modest payments from some newspapers for some works that I have provided for them over my time in Parliament.

At the heart of this Bill are three clauses—primarily clauses 168 and 169—that came in from the other place and fundamentally attack the freedom of the press. There is widespread agreement on the need to regulate the digital economy and the ownership of data effectively. There is cross-party agreement on that, and I doubt that there will be a Division this evening. However, the freedom of the press and freedom of speech are absolutely at the heart of our democracy. Members of Parliament should remember that those freedoms will be exercised in a way that does not always provide hagiographies for us. Quite understandably, newspapers will say critical things of people on the Government Benches and of people on the Opposition Benches. Sometimes they will be fair; sometimes they will be unfair. Sometimes we will read something and think that we have made a mistake; sometimes we will read it and know that the newspaper has made a mistake. That is the flotsam and jetsam of political life. For every piece in the Daily Mail that upsets Opposition Members, there will be something in the Daily Mirror or The Guardian that upsets us. That is how political life works, and we surely are not sufficiently well versed in the reality of control. In the 18th and 19th centuries, libel laws were used to prevent the press from exercising the freedom that we think of as a constitutional birth right. We know that the Americans, when writing the bill of rights to their constitution, made the second amendment a clear statement of freedom of speech. Why? It was in response to the abuses that they thought were taking place in the United Kingdom at that point. They put it in because they were worried about such things as the persecution of John Wilkes and his being sentenced to prison not for what he did, but for what he said. We see that being restored in clauses 168 and 169, with the outrageous, monstrous idea that if a paper prints something that is entirely accurate—every dot and comma is true—but has not bended the knee to officialdom, the fine will be to pay its own costs and the costs of the party about whom it has told the truth.

The hon. Member for Keighley referred to the Daily Mail and the Lawrence affair. That terrifying right-wing newspaper, which I read every day and enjoy, exposed the murderers of Stephen Lawrence in a way that required it to say things about the murderers that, until double jeopardy laws were changed, could never be proved in a court. What if this law had existed then and those people, whom we now know were guilty of murder, had sued the Daily Mail for saying something that was true? What if the Daily Mail had had to pay the costs of murderers? That is what their noble lordships have put into this Bill.

This is more serious on a day-to-day basis than the worst case that I can think of. We know the weakness of our local papers and how they struggle hand to mouth, but how easy would it be, for example, for my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), who is no longer in his place, to take to court the journal that he does not like because it said inaccurate things about him. It is far enough for him not to like them, but if an hon. Member took a local paper to court, that local paper would be insolvent, because many of them do not have powerful parents behind them. Many of them—I am thinking of some in my constituency—are run by entrepreneurial individuals trying to make a reasonable living. The threat of having to pay double costs would be sufficient to stop them printing a disagreeable story about us.

That is great. It means that in all Conservative seats, no disagreeable things will be published about Conservatives; and in all Labour seats, the same will be true. Therefore, I will remain the representative of North East Somerset forever and ever—amen, amen, alleluia—and the hon. Member for Keighley remains in Keighley likewise. As it happens, we both think that is fundamentally wrong and an attack on democracy.

Free speech is not there so that Rupert Murdoch, a man I greatly admire, can make a great deal of money; it is not there so that the noble Lord Rothermere can, likewise, make a decent living; it is there because it is the pillar of democracy. If we do not have free speech, how will we expose corrupt Governments, incompetent politicians and—I dare say there are some occasionally—Governments who make mistakes? Councils that get things wrong, errors that are made and dishonesties that are performed, how will they be reported if every one of us can shut down our local newspaper just by saying that we will go to court and the newspaper will have double costs?

The proponents of clauses 168 and 169 will say, “That’s all very well, but there is IMPRESS.” What is the fundamental principle that has prevented newspapers from signing up to IMPRESS? I was one of 13 MPs who voted against the Crime and Courts Act 2013, which allowed this to happen, and I was absolutely right to do so. The principle is that a free press is one that cannot be regulated by the state, and an application to be approved by a regulator approved by a royal charter is regulation by the state. That is not comparable to the judges or other independent organs of the state, because the judges are part of the state—they are simply independent from this place and from the Executive. The whole point of the press is that it is not in any way part of the state. Quite understandably, no serious newspaper of the left or of the right has been willing to bend the knee to IMPRESS, and nor should it.

Let us now turn to IMPRESS, what causes it, what its origins are and who funds it. It is a scandal of our time that their noble lordships have made an amendment that has been pushed and harried through by perhaps one of the most disreputable figures in British public life. I refer, of course, to Mr Max Mosley, who has provided £3 million for IMPRESS and who took a libel action against the News of the World when it said he had indulged
in Nazi-themed orgies. The *News of the World* was wrong: the orgies were not Nazi-themed. They were orgies, but they were German-themed. I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker, for saying those shocking things in front of you, but that is what happened.

The *News of the World* lost, and it was deemed that Mr Mosley’s privacy had been invaded. Before that, few of us had heard of him, except we knew vaguely of his involvement in Formula 1 and we knew his father had been a Member of Parliament—a Labour Member of Parliament, as it happened—and had then set up the British Union of Fascists.

But we did not know that Mr Max Mosley himself held views—or, he claims, had in the past held views—that no reputable person could possibly hold. Views that are so repellent that, though I read them out because it is important to understand what underpins IMPRESS, I do so with considerable reluctance. Mr Mosley was the authoriser of a leaflet, and because we have stood for Parliament, we all know the importance of a leaflet’s authoriser.

I have the most wonderful agent, Margaret Brewer from Somerset. She was referred to by *The Sunday Times* as a “flinty rural matron”, and indeed she is. Nothing goes in my leaflets without her approval. People may think I am independent-minded, but I have not a view that has not been approved by Mrs Brewer. We all know how this works. If our agent does not approve it, it does not go in. What did this leaflet say? As I say, this is so repellent that, though I read it out because it is important to understand what underpins IMPRESS, I do so with considerable reluctance. Mr Mosley was the authoriser of a leaflet, and because we have stood for Parliament, we all know the importance of a leaflet’s authoriser.

That is the view of the funder of IMPRESS. It is a little wonder that our free press does not want to be associated with such a man. It is a little wonder that, to its credit, the Labour party has now refused to take any further funding from this man, but IMPRESS has not. IMPRESS has not condemned this man. It has not said it will refuse further funding from the charitable trust he set up purely and specifically to keep IMPRESS running. IMPRESS has done nothing of this kind. It has a reputation of its own, and there is a certain irony in this; its chief executive is a man called Jonathan Heawood, and he tweeted, of all things, that the *Daily Mail* was “a neo-fascist rag”. Dare I say that he might know a good deal more about neo-fascists than one had thought when that tweet was originally circulated?

We are suggesting, under clauses 168 and 169, that that most precious thing that underpins, protects and gives us our democracy should be sacrificed to the honour of a man who has waged a campaign against freedom of the press because it exposed his perversions. That is the long and short of it. The hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), the deputy leader of the Labour party and shadow Secretary of State, said that Mr Mosley does not hold those views any more—well, how gracious of him. But how fortunate are we that our free press has exposed those views, so that we know them in the context of the debate we are having today. I say to Opposition Members that any of them who go through the Lobby at a later stage to vote in favour of those clauses are voting to support Max Mosley, his abhorrent views and his money. Those of us who believe in freedom will vote them down.
and the EU’s Brexit negotiators to turn a blind eye to the theft of data protection rights from EU citizens that the immigration exemption represents? It is a clear and evident breach of faith with the December agreement on EU citizens. There is simply no way that the EU could or should grant the UK a data adequacy agreement if we intend to take data protection rights from its citizens with this measure. That is before Brexit; if we do not secure a data adequacy agreement while we are in the EU, it will be far more difficult and demanding as a third country. The granting of data adequacy for third countries involves a more stringent examination of how national security data is dealt with.

I say candidly to those on the Treasury Bench that if they want their Brexit negotiations to proceed as smoothly as internal Tory party politics allows and to secure the data adequacy agreement that British business desperately needs, they will have to drop that immigration exemption—not water it down, not cave it, but drop it.

Moreover, the exemption is insulting to freedom, the rule of law and access to justice. What it means, as others have said, is that an individual cannot know why he or she has had their case refused by the Home Office. The Home Office will be under no duty at all to disclose the information in a person’s file and the information used to make the decision. That is an affront to natural justice. In any dispute about how a case has been administered, it is surely self-evident that officials should have to provide that information.

To help Government Back Benchers who care about the rule of law even more, I should say that this affront could affect a British citizen. The administrative mistake might well be that someone has incorrectly been considered not to be British. In the many briefings that we have been given for this debate, there is example after example of British citizens being denied justice, with their very nationality being denied. Only a subject access request by an individual’s lawyer can end up revealing such basic errors of the Home Office.

Let us face it: the Home Office holds the prize for the largest number of mistakes made, week in, week out, by any Department. To take just one example, the Home Office has a shocking 10% error rate on immigration status checks alone. The Conservative party may be happy to take away access to justice and the rule of law from British citizens, but I am not.

Let us look at the impact on fairness. The best way to illustrate how deeply unfair the immigration exemption would be is with a few examples—real life examples, which is to say real people. Let me take some examples from the Law Society brief. It takes the case of Z, a failed asylum seeker attempting to reopen his case:

“The Home Office refused to reopen the case, saying that he had previously left the UK voluntarily and had received a resettlement grant from the Home Office. The SAR revealed that a third person had assumed his identity, and had applied for and secured voluntary return and the grant had subsequently been removed. The file further revealed that there was no cross-checking of signatures, photographs, or fingerprints on the Voluntary Assisted Returns scheme.”

This would have had serious consequences for the individual had the subject access request not revealed the identity theft, but, of course, under this immigration exemption there will be no such right to make that request.

We have talked about issues around domestic violence. We have heard the example of a woman applicant, the victim of domestic violence, who had no knowledge of the immigration application being made for her because her husband had all the papers. A subject access request would be her only path to sorting out her immigration status.

There are many examples showing how unfairly this will work in practice. Another example of Home Office mistakes on identity is the case of a nurse who had been working in the NHS and living lawfully in the UK for many years, but whose application to naturalise as a British citizen was denied because of her alleged poor immigration history. The brief says:

“A SAR was made and it became clear that the Home Office had mixed her up with another Nigerian woman with a slightly similar name and a poor immigration history. Following the SAR, she was able to challenge the Home Office.”

Under this Bill, she would not have been able to do that, and the NHS would have lost a diligent trained nurse.

There are so many other such examples, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I could detain the House longer than you would feel was sensible, so I will not read them out. None the less, I say to Ministers that they exist. If they bothered to read them—I urge them to do so—they would see that these are real people. If this legislation goes through with the immigration exemption, the Ministers on the Front Bench would be responsible for ruining the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of innocent people, because they would have given the Home Office—the Executive—too much power, which means that it could not be held to account.

9.27 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am very pleased to follow the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), not least because it allows me to dispense with the first part of my speech, which will please the whole House. He has made exactly the right points in relation to what is known as the immigration exemption. It makes unnecessarily contentious a technically complex and, as Members on both sides of the House have said, necessary Bill. It makes EU citizens second-class citizens and allows the Home Office to collect and store data in a way that undermines other protections in the Bill, which means that it is something that we should not support. I hope that the Government will reconsider it.

I will spend what time I have dealing with the other matter of contention, which a number of Members on both sides of the House have raised: the amendments made in the other place. There are two. One is a requirement on the Government to proceed with a Leveson 2 public inquiry, and the other would effectively bring in, for the purposes of data protection offences, section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, which introduces costs. It would ensure that individuals affected by data protection offences—one could read across into defamation and other matters—committed by national newspapers had affordable access to justice in any action against those newspapers. That is the essence of it.

The second part of the Leveson inquiry was promised to the victims of press abuse by all party leaders in the clearest possible way, and it is difficult to see what has significantly changed since that time. Despite that, and perhaps even more surprisingly, despite the wishes and
views of Sir Brian Leveson himself, the Government announced in an arbitrary and rather casual manner in the statement last week their intention to cancel part 2. If it does not have the courage to cancel part 2, we will not know the extent of corruption across newspaper groups, the extent of corrupt relationships with the Metropolitan Police Service, and the extent of illegality and cover-up at newspaper titles.

We need to proceed with Leveson part 2 because we owe that duty to the Hillsborough families, to the families of Milly Dowler and of Madeleine McCann, to Christopher Jefferies and to others who deserve to know the truth about what happened to them. That would have been an uncontroversial thing to say even two or three years ago, but it appears to have been forgotten. The innumerable meetings that now take place between senior members of the Government and senior people in the press—and the paucity of such meetings with the victims—speak for themselves. We have not got to the bottom of the hacking and data scandals at the News of the World, the Mirror Group titles and other newspapers. This issue does not affect only the newspapers of the right or of the left; it affects newspapers across the spectrum.

The fact that Sir Brian is firmly in favour of finishing the inquiry with extended terms of reference—we know this now, although I do not think that anyone who heard the statement last Thursday believed it to be the case at the time—really sets a precedent. I wonder when it has previously happened that the views of an inquiry chairman have been disregarded and overturned in this manner, part-way through an inquiry. If this were a scandal in any other industry, the press would be firmly behind finishing the inquiry. Public confidence in the press, and in us, will suffer if inquiries into press misconduct are abandoned, effectively at the instigation of those who run the media in this country. As I said in an intervention, if we can do this with one inquiry, we can do it with another.

The Government have quite rightly set up inquiries into the Grenfell Tower disaster and the contaminated blood scandal—two extraordinary scandals affecting millions of people across this country and our major institutions. What is to prevent the Government from stepping in at any time and saying, “We’re not happy with the direction. We believe that this inquiry is now irrelevant. We won’t continue it anymore.”? This weakens faith in our constitution.

I turn to the amendments made in the other place regarding section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. I have heard comments that are just plain wrong, particularly from Government Members. It may just be coincidence that many of them began their remarks by saying that they were former journalists, but they then misrepresented what is intended by—and, indeed, the actuality of—section 40 and the amendments made in the other place. In any event, their comments were miscast.

Cost shifting is often a part of the cost regime in our courts. It is done to increase either access to or the administration of justice. It is done not punitively, but to encourage, and to ensure that justice functions effectively in everyone’s interests. In this case it gives newspapers the option of signing up to an independent regulator that offers compulsory arbitration, or meeting the court costs of reasonable claims made against them. This ensures that members of the public affected by press illegality can either bring a claim under low-cost arbitration or have costs protection in court. Arbitration is cheaper and quicker for both sides.

Newspapers also benefit from cost shifting, because they enjoy costs protection if they are in an independent regulator offering arbitration and a claimant rejects the arbitration service on offer. That is the key point. This is not there to punish newspapers but to protect impecunious claimants. It will also protect small, genuinely independent newspapers and small publishers. One hears that the whole local newspaper industry is against it, but 80% of that industry is owned by the big conglomerates, which have exactly the same interests—financial—as the major national newspaper chains.

The purpose of cost shifting is to enable an individual—who—in the way suffered by the Dowler family, Christopher Jefferies and those in the other cases that we are all aware of—has been horrifically maligned and harassed by newspapers to go to court, to get justice, and, in this case, to go to arbitration without the risk of losing their house and savings, or of simply being unable to get into court at all.

That risk was partly resolved—not deliberately; it came about through the way in which the law developed—by no win, no fee agreements, which meant that somebody who had been defamed or had their privacy threatened in this way could go to a lawyer and ask them to take their case. The lawyer would say, “Let’s see if it’s a good case or not,” and if it was a good case, they would agree to take it on a no win, no fee basis. That protected the litigant both from their own costs and from the costs of the other side if they lost. It was no longer the case that if someone took the Daily Mail or The Sun to court, they risked everything because the newspaper group had been able to build up costs on the other side to discourage, in effect, even the most meritorious litigation.

With the passing of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, that option went, and it is far, far more difficult to get any type of no win, no fee assistance, so we are not at that status quo; we have moved several steps backwards, and if section 40 and the amendments tabled in the other place are not passed, litigants will once again be at risk in this way. Low-cost arbitration and the need to incentivise media groups to join that service—not, as the IPSO scheme would, allowing them to pick and choose—is essential to that. It is a low-cost way of doing it, but it works just as much for the press as for the individual litigant.

Apart from the fact that a promise was made to the victims of press abuse, and the fact that this provides cost protection to newspapers and ensures that small and local newspaper groups are protected from powerful and wealthy litigants, cost shifting encourages the use of arbitration, which is quicker and cheaper for all sides and is increasingly a feature of all parts of our legal system. This poses no threat to the local press.

The alternative is IPSO. I was incredulous to hear IPSO described as a move on from the Press Complaints Commission. It is the same people running the same racket, with the same failure to address the issue. The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin)—I do not often find myself on the same side of the argument as him—got it exactly right. This is a sham, and if we support it, we are going along with the sham.
This is not about punishing and silencing the press, as though they are the weak vessel—it is about protecting the people to whom all parties and almost every Member who was in this House at the time made a promise: the victims of egregious press harassment who suffered terrible campaigns against them. We forget that at our peril. The Government have simply waited until they think that time has moved on and the heat has gone out of this. Well, I hope that the heat has not gone out of it. I hope that the public and sufficient numbers of Members on both sides of the House will remember the duty that we owe to those victims. These are modest amendments from the other place. The idea that this is in any way tying the hands of the press is pure hyperbole. We need to incorporate the amendments, and we need to fulfil Leveson 2, because otherwise we are failing terribly the victims of press harassment.

9.39 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): This has been quite a useful debate for rehearsing the arguments and divisions that I suspect we will have when the Bill moves upstairs to Committee. Some of our debate, particularly in the speeches made by Opposition Members, has even been about data protection.

It is probably fair that I start with the note of unity that the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), set out at the beginning of his remarks. I think there is a great deal of optimism on both sides of the House about the possibilities of technology in the years to come. The philosophical difference is that we genuinely believe that the new world of trade for the years to come will be built on a world of trust. If we are to have a really robust foundation of trust in the digital economy that will take shape over the course of this century, we will need a strong regime of rights. We need rights that are comprehensive and genuinely enforceable in courts, where necessary, and those rights need to live in a democracy that has safeguards, including safeguards around the way in which elections are fought in the digital age—those elections need to be free and fair—with a press that is clean.

The problem with the Bill, as we see it, is that it is an opportunity missed. The Secretary of State argued that it was forensic; we would argue that it is a little bit more piecemeal. It is not haphazard; it is seeking to do a job by incorporating a substantive bit of legislation from Brussels into British law. However, we are troubled that the privacy provisions are not quite robust enough, and that argument was well made by a number of my right hon. and hon. Friends. In particular, the decision not to include the text of article 8 of the EU charter of fundamental rights to safeguard privacy and ensure that adequacy agreements will be there in years to come was an error. The approach is just too risky, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) warned.

These risks of divergence are serious because so much of our exports, in particular to Europe, are services exports. Some 70% to 80% of those services exports may be digitally enabled, so we simply cannot afford any risk whatsoever. We need to put all risk to any future adequacy agreement beyond doubt.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), our man for definitions and a great deal more, made a very effective point about this not being a one-off exercise. This process will endure, so we are trying to make sure that British and European courts interpret privacy law in a way that is continually consistent over the years to come.

We all need to recognise the juggling act that the Prime Minister is trying to perform. We all need to acknowledge with some honesty the creative ambiguity that she sometimes needs to sustain to keep everybody on the train. I think we all recognise the precariousness of her position. We know that her personal position as captain of the ship is not trouble-free, so I think that those on the Treasury Bench will forgive us for not relying on the full weight of a No. 10 press release, as terribly robust as that is, as ensuring that adequacy provisions will be secured through the commitments that she has made to protect privacy. We would much rather rely on the full weight of the law, because that feels like a much more reassuring position.

In the modern economy, there are rights that we need to take into account. Those rights are new and increasingly necessary in the modern age, such as the right not to suffer as a result of decisions made not by humans but by algorithms. My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) made the powerful point that the great risk of algorithms that take decisions is that they may hard-code old injustice into new injustice. That idea should trouble us all. The Bill does not include adequate safeguards against that at the moment, so we will need to address that.

We heard the troubling line of argument in the debate that we should carve out newcomers to this country from the rights and safeguards that are enjoyed by everybody else under the Bill. I have to say to the Minister that the measures on immigration are a mistake. We will seek to delete them, and I hope she accepts that initiative. I was the Immigration Minister who introduced the biggest shake-up to our immigration system for 40 years. I created the UK Border Agency, and I introduced the points system. In my two or two and a half years in the Home Office, I came to learn that our immigration system is not some celestial design—it is a human institution. The Home Office and the immigration system take decisions that are bad or wrong and that need to be corrected. If we delete the protections under the Bill for newcomers, we will put justice in jeopardy. We will genuinely risk denying justice to those newcomers who need information to fight their cases effectively.

I lost cases that were brought because people were able to draw on information through subject access requests, and justice was eventually done in those cases. However, mistakes are made, and I do not think the Minister wants a system that is so prone to error. We have to build in checks and balances to the immigration justice system, and she has perfectly adequate safeguards on crime prevention in the Bill. As a former Home Office Minister, I can recognise what is basically a gratuitous land grab by the Home Office. These powers are not needed, and I hope the Minister will ask her Home Office colleagues to look at the provisions again.

For rights to be real, there needs to be a method of enforcing them effectively, which is why the provisions for collective redress are so important. The shadow Secretary of State talked about the work that we have
done with people such as Baroness Kidron in the other place on safeguarding rights for children. A third of internet users are children, and we need to ensure that their rights, along with those of everybody else, are actually enforceable.

The idea that a child whose rights are violated will take Facebook to court is, frankly, fanciful. We need to allow consumer organisations and others to take what are in effect class actions, because otherwise the implementation of rights risks being weak, undermining not simply justice, but the strength of our regulatory regime.

We will want to propose other, more comprehensive rights. We are not under any illusions about the Government accepting our data Bill of rights in full, but we want to make sure that such rights are on the table because we are at the start of a process. Just as there were something like 17 Factory Acts during the 19th century, there will be many data protection and e-commerce modernisation Acts over the next 80 years. I am afraid that Members will, for better or worse, have to get used to that process. We think that putting in place a strong framework for rights and enforcement now is just a wise precaution for the future.

As we have heard in many contributions, there will be quite a lot of toing and froing about some of the amendments made in the other place. I hope that many in this House will not take the approach of the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones). I feared at times that he was anticipating that we could somehow secure justice regarding suspected historical offences by closing the door, switching off the lights and pretending that nothing had ever happened. I do not think that there are many fields of public policy in which that has proved to be a successful foundation for reform. It is important that we delve into offences that took place in the past.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) made some important points. Politicians on both sides of the House made promises to the victims of phone hacking, and it is an extremely dangerous precedent for a Secretary of State to say, “Yes, I know we made promises about an inquiry but, you know what, we don’t think that inquiry, even though it isn’t finished, really should wind its course to a conclusion.” It is not a satisfactory state of affairs when the Executive can intervene and, in effect, seek to stop inquiries in their tracks, in the teeth of opposition—in this case, from the noble Lord Leveson—setting out why they should actually continue.

I hope that many Members will, like the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), argue for the importance of honouring promises made in the past, and indeed of making sure that we have a press regulation regime that balances the interests of a free and fair press with the need not to defame people wilfully. The Government are making an odd argument by asking us to take them seriously when they want to install a new data protection regime, while at the same time short-circuiting an inquiry into the most egregious violations of data privacy that we have ever seen in the public sphere. I am afraid that that approach does not inspire a terrific amount of confidence, so I hope that the Minister and the Secretary of State will listen again to the pleas of Lord Leveson and reconsider their support for the amendments that were carried with such force in the other place. The Government may make their own proposals, but I suspect that there will continue to be a strong body of support in the other place for those amendments.

Stephen Timms: May I take it from what my right hon. Friend says that the official Opposition’s position is that we will support the retention of the amendments agreed in the other place?

Liam Byrne: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We will support the retention of those amendments, and we will seek to offer a much more wide-ranging, comprehensive approach, which we think the Government should take. We will offer a much more comprehensive, well-rounded and thought-through system of rights for the digital age. We will offer an effective means of safeguarding those rights through the introduction of new forms of collective redress. We will offer new safeguards that help to protect our democracy and that ensure free and fair elections and press justice.

We will also seek to prompt the Government to confirm precisely when they will modernise the e-commerce directive, because many of the threats to freedom in the digital age will come from the fearsome five data giants of this age, which will need regulating in new ways. I think there is some cross-party consensus about the need for the e-commerce directive to be modernised, so we will table amendments that will encourage the Government to get their skates on. Crucially, however, we will table amendments that put beyond doubt the future of any adequacy agreement with the European Union.

As the economy changes, so must the law. There will be many more data and privacy laws to come in the years ahead. We will encourage the Government to put in statute a framework that is not merely fit for today, but fit for the future.

9.52 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Margot James): I thank all Members for their contributions to this excellent and wide-ranging debate and their lordships for the immense amount of work that they have done on the Bill thus far. Members on both sides of the House want a Bill that protects personal data and allows individuals to maintain control over what is their property and what is important to them, and we want these rights to be enforceable. That is a positive start on which we can all agree.

Various Members, including the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and the shadow Minister, stressed the importance of the continuity of adequacy post Brexit. The hon. Member for Bristol North West asked what the Prime Minister meant by saying that she wanted to achieve more than adequacy. It was, I am sure, to ensure that the Information Commissioner can continue her excellent contribution to the evolution of the GDPR through her association with the European data protection board, when that comes into being.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) and many others mentioned immigration. I want to reassure the House that we are seeking not a blanket exemption, but something that can be applied only when complying with a certain right would be likely to prejudice the maintenance
of effective immigration control. Every request to exercise a right under the GDPR would still have to be considered on its individual merits, and the rights of appeal required by the GDPR remain in place.

There was a great deal of debate about the freedom of the press. In the short time that I have, I cannot do justice to the fantastic contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) and for South Dorset (Richard Drax) and the hon. Members for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and for Keighley (John Grogan). We heard the real show stopper from my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who was listened to with rapt attention as he contrasted the pretence of freedom of speech with the reality of control, which would be the result of the amendments to which we have been asked to agree. The Government have been clear that we will attempt to defeat them in this place.

We have had a very valuable debate. We have touched on various issues—children and social media, artificial intelligence and cyber-resilience—and there are others that we will address subsequently.

Liam Byrne: Will the Minister give way?

Margot James: I will have plenty of time in Committee to debate with the right hon. Gentleman. I am sure that we all agree that the Bill is important and timely.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I note that the Minister has not yet concluded her remarks, but it seems that she might do so before the moment of interruption. There are two outstanding motions on the Order Paper to be voted on following the decision on Second Reading: the programme motion and the money resolution. I note that, under Standing Order No. 83A(7) and Standing Order No. 52(1)(a), they are not subject to debate, but if there were any time left over between the conclusion of the Minister’s remarks and the moment of interruption, would it be possible to discuss those two motions?

Mr Speaker: No, but the hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. The fact that he has done so has given me an opportunity to clarify the matter for the benefit of the House.

Andy Slaughter: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. If the Minister has concluded, or was at the point of concluding, her remarks, may I seek your guidance? We have had an excellent and very full debate on this matter. I was here for the opening speeches and decided to stay and speak in the debate. I noted that the Secretary of State said that this is a Bill with 208 clauses. We have had a full debate, but the Minister, in a matter of two or three minutes, has not in any conceivable way replied to it, despite having time available to do so. What can be done to ensure not only that this House has a full debate, but that matters are responded to by the Government, as they are duty bound to do?

Mr Speaker: It is very much for a Minister to decide for how long he, or in this case she, responds to a debate. I understand that the hon. Gentleman is somewhat agitated. I am saddened to see him in a state of perturbation about the matter, but there is no immediate relief, other than the fact that he has registered his concern and it is on the record. There is, however, nothing to be added by me in response to his point of order.

Daniel Zeichner: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. As my hon. Friend says, this has been a very long debate in which serious issues have been raised by Opposition Members. This debate was about not just Leveson, but data protection, which is particularly important for the future, and Opposition Members asked some major questions. I asked about the future of research. Researchers are very concerned, but they have not had an answer from the Minister. Is there anything you that can suggest, Mr Speaker, that would enable them to get an answer this evening from the Minister?

Mr Speaker: It is for the Minister to decide how long she replies. I am sorry if the hon. Gentleman feels that his points have not been responded to by the Minister, but she is legendarily succinct, and has obviously decided—indeed, or in consultation with her colleagues on a collective basis—that tonight shall be no exception to the general principle of Jamesian succinctness.

Margot James: I commend the Bill to the House. Question put and agreed to. Bill accordingly read a Second time.

DATA PROTECTION BILL [LORDS]
(PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the Data Protection Bill [Lords]:

Committal
1. The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee
2. Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 27 March 2018.

3. The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading
4. Proceedings on Consideration and proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

6. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings
7. Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

Mr Speaker: Well, it is most unusual that we are proceeding in quite such an efficient way before we have reached the moment of interruption. It is constitutionally notable, and colleagues will wish to take account of it, either for the purposes of repetition in the future or avoidance, depending upon their taste.
DATA PROTECTION BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

Queen’s recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Data Protection Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by a Minister of the Crown or a government department; and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

Business Without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

POLITICAL PARTIES, NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Transparency of Donations and Loans etc. (Northern Ireland Political Parties) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 23 November 2017, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 7 March (Standing Order No. 41A).

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

BUILDING SOCIETIES

That the draft Building Societies (Restricted Transactions) (Amendment to the Prohibition on Entering into Derivatives Transactions) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 20 December 2017, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

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

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Financial Services Act 2012 (Mutual Societies) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 19 December 2017, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

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

CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETIES

That the draft Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014 (Amendments to Audit Requirements) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 4 December 2017, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

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

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

That the draft Waste Enforcement (England and Wales) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 25 January, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

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

PASSPORTS

That the draft Passport (Fees) Regulations Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 7 March (Standing Order No. 41A).

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was clearly most animated at least by the importance of the retention of his own passport, and we are most grateful to him for that. There is no surprise there.

COMMITTEES

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House—in the light of the development of tonight’s proceedings, I say this with a modicum of apprehension—I propose to take motions 10 to 14 together.

Ordered,

CONSOLIDATION, &c., BILLS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

That Mims Davies and Amanda Milling be discharged from the Joint Committee on Consolidation, &c., Bills and Bim Afolami and Colin Clark be added.

FINANCE

That Mr William Wragg be discharged from the Finance Committee and Luke Graham be added.

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS

That Maria Caulfield be discharged from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and Mr Robert Goodwill be added.

PETITIONS

That Rehman Chishti be discharged from the Petitions Committee and Luke Hall be added.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

That Vicky Ford be a member of the Women and Equalities Committee.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

Mr Speaker: We come now to the Adjournment. In the extraordinarily improbable and inconceivable event that there are Members present who do not wish to hear the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on the subject of the liquidation of DMB Solutions, I entreat them, please, to leave the Chamber quickly and quietly, so that the substantial number of Members remaining can listen to her oration with due attention.
DMB Solutions: Liquidation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

10.4 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The issue that I should like to raise tonight has arisen in my constituency in recent weeks, but it has national implications. I am also sure that it will be familiar to many Members of this House: namely, the sudden collapse of a private sector business—in this case, a building services company. That collapse has left my constituents out of pocket and in some cases literally out of their home. Understandably, they are angry and frustrated by the response, or more accurately, the lack of it from the relevant state bodies.

DMB Solutions, a Brighton-based building and design company, went into voluntary liquidation over the new year. It had operated in my constituency since about 2009 and, to a slightly lesser extent, in the neighbouring constituencies of the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), who I am delighted to see in his place, and the hon. Member for Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle). The fallout from the collapse of the company has gained national media attention, owing to both the number of people affected and the scale of the financial losses they suffered. More than 400 local people have joined a victim support group on Facebook set up more than a year before the company collapsed—a point to which I will return—while a significant number have lost in excess of £50,000. This was money saved up over years and paid to DMB for work that will now never be completed, or at least not by DMB Solutions.

It has been shocking and heart-breaking to meet my constituents and hear at first hand the devastating situations in which many have been left by the demise of the company. For example, Norma Smith, who is 84 years old, employed DMB Solutions last summer to build a wet room with a toilet in the downstairs of her house in anticipation of one day being able to use the stairs. In common with many others who have complained to me about DMB Solutions, Norma paid in full before work commenced. She reports that the contract time of three to four weeks for completion stretched into months and the staged payment plan we had signed, so we are £60,000 out of pocket, and our lovely home has been ruined. These events have rocked me to the core and I still cannot quite believe this awful thing has happened to us. In my opinion, DMB Solutions have acted incompetently, immorally and illegally. What I find so distressing is that various bodies and organisations that exist partly to protect the public in these situations seem to have been ineffective, enabling the company and Directors to continue to operate.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Today it is DMB Solutions and Brighton Pavilion; tomorrow it will be another company in Edinburgh, Cardiff or Belfast—this is a problem across the whole United Kingdom. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is essential that subcontractors be able to continue with and be paid for work that has been started and that this be a priority for the liquidators, because sometimes small contractors are able to finish the job for a small price?

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Gentleman has drawn attention to a very important issue. It is not just individual householders who are suffering; many companies are also suffering, and the smaller ones may face bankruptcy as a result of not being paid by the other companies. The ripple effect of these actions extends very far, and of course it is by no means limited to one part of the country. This is happening in all the nations of the United Kingdom.

My constituent went on to say: “As the weeks went by with very little work being carried out, downstairs a building site, I became very exhausted. In the end, I found myself in the position of having an upstairs with no heating, water or Building Control approval, and a downstairs—was intended to take four weeks and cost about £95,000. We did some research on the company and were unable to find anything concerning. We had seen several boards outside houses and were impressed by the website and by the promises of the design consultant. However, in early January this year, we found ourselves in the position of having an upstairs with no heating, water or Building Control approval, and a downstairs which were clearly ripping her off?

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I agree entirely. It is a point to which I will return shortly. As he says, the company must have known six days before it chose to go into liquidation that it was about to do that. I would have thought that to seek tens of thousands of pounds just days before was criminal—I would have thought it was fraud—but we are having great difficulty prosecuting the case.

I want to share one last story from a constituent who told me:

“My partner and I started a project with DMB Solutions in May last year. The project—to rearrange rooms in the loft extension, and create an extension housing a large open plan family room downstairs—was intended to take four weeks and cost about £95,000. We did some research on the company and were unable to find anything concerning. We had seen several boards outside houses and were impressed by the website and by the promises of the design consultant. However, in early January this year, we found ourselves in the position of having an upstairs with no heating, water or Building Control approval, and a downstairs which were outside the scope of works, and a water system which does not provide enough hot water for a bath. We had paid all the money in accordance with the staged payment plan we had signed, so we are £60,000 out of pocket, and our lovely home has been ruined. These events have rocked me to the core and I still cannot quite believe this awful thing has happened to us. In my opinion, DMB Solutions have acted incompetently, immorally and illegally. What I find so distressing is that various bodies and organisations that exist partly to protect the public in these situations seem to have been ineffectual, enabling the company and Directors to continue to operate.”

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a powerful point. To add to her catalogue of constituents, I can speak of those who have turned to me, such as Alison, who gave £30,000 to this company six days before it went bust. It knew it would not fulfil the order, yet it took £30,000 from somebody—in the full knowledge that it would not complete the work. Does the hon. Lady not think that in such cases the authorities should investigate fully to ensure that the full force of the law is on the side of people such as Alison, not of the directors, who were clearly ripping her off?
personally owed a proportional amount of money in taxes, someone in authority would have been having a stern conversation with me about it.”

I think that my constituent was entirely right.

One of the striking features of the many cases brought to my attention is the fact that—as we heard from the hon. Member for Hove—the office of DMB Solutions was sending out invoices to customers for work yet to be undertaken, right up until a few days before the directors of the company called in the liquidators on 29 December. For example, Mandy Stewart, a teacher, contracted with DMB Solutions last summer to do a loft conversion at her home. Her partner’s daughter and granddaughter were moving in with them, and work began in mid-October. The project was never completed. Mandy was left with a partially finished and uninhabitable loft conversion, damage to her neighbour’s roof, and damage to her ceilings and light fittings because a tarpaulin had been badly fitted by DMB’s workers during wet and windy weather.

Having paid some £41,000 to DMB Solutions, Mandy is now faced with finding further funds to have the work completed. She also needs to pay for inspection by a structural surveyor to ensure that what has been done so far is safe, to engage building control representatives to sign off the work and to have scaffolding re-erected because the previous company took theirs down when they had not been paid by DMB Solutions.

Furthermore, on 21 December, Mandy received an invoice for almost £10,000 for the next stage of the project. It was not actually due until January, but the covering e-mail from DMB Solutions stated that it was being sent early because the DMB offices would be closed during the Christmas break. As by then Mandy had serious concerns about the work that had been done, she did not pay, but, as she says, “it is extremely hard to believe that the DMB directors did not know that the company was insolvent on 21 December 2017; barely four working days before they called in the administrators.”

From the accounts that I have been given, it is clear that Mandy is far from alone in having been invoiced by DMB Solutions for a large sum of money, by email on or about 21 December, when the directors must have known that the company faced imminent insolvency. In fact, it is clear that the company was signing up new customers as late as mid-December. Charlotte Preston paid £11,000 to DMB Solutions for an extension to her home on 15 December, but no work was ever started. Even more disturbingly, it is clear that disgruntled customers of DMB Solutions were reporting serious concerns about the company to trading standards as far back as early 2016.

According to accounts filed with Companies House on 11 December, by the time the company went into liquidation on 2 January this year, it owed no less than £542,000 to HMRC in unpaid VAT. Indeed, it seems that it may have been trading unlawfully for a considerable time before its collapse. One member of the Facebook victim support group, Andrew Painton, first raised concerns with trading standards that DMB Solutions was trading fraudulently, rather than just incompetently, in March 2017, and has done so many times since then. In January this year, Andrew told me:

“To say that the performance of Trading Standards has been lamentable would, in my view, be over praising them. They could have done so much more to protect the customers who become victims of this company during the latter nine months of 2017.”

He continued:

“In the Autumn of 2017, a fellow member of the Facebook victim support group submitted a Freedom of Information request to Trading Standards, and this revealed the escalating number of complaints in recent years about DMB Solutions. This did galvanise Trading Standards into action…but it was too little too late.”

I recognise, of course, that Ministers are not responsible for the collapse of private sector businesses, but I hope that the Minister will be able to help this evening by providing clarity about what my constituents can do. Specifically, they want to know how to try to obtain financial recompense and how to ensure that the directors of DMB Solutions cannot simply walk away from their debts—both to their unfortunate customers and to the taxpayer—and start all over again by forming a new company. I can find no adequate Government guidance on either of those points. If there is no comfort under existing legal frameworks, perhaps the Minister can point me to the changes that would be required to company law, or any other laws, that would allow my constituents to be recompensed for their suffering.

Since December, the local trading standards office has collected evidence from those affected by the collapse of DMB Solutions. It has also advised those who make a complaint to the Action Fraud line, which reports to the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau, based in the City of London police service. Trading standards in Brighton also says that it plans to submit a report to the economic crime unit of Sussex police. However, the Action Fraud line appears to focus on cybercrime, rather than incompetently run or even unlawfully run building companies, and the House of Commons Library has been emphatic in advising me that there is nothing that trading standards will now be able to do for those of my constituents who have lost out as a result of the collapse of DMB Solutions. The Library tells me that the appropriate body, at least in terms of seeking to get the directors of DMB Solutions disqualified from acting as company directors in future—something my constituents are understandably keen to see happen—is the Insolvency Service.

My office has consulted a local lawyer specialising in consumer rights, who similarly suggested that the Insolvency Service, not trading standards, is the appropriate body for my constituents to complain to about DMB Solutions. However, the Insolvency Service phone line no longer exists, and its website has a small amount of hard-to-find information on it, stating that it can carry out a confidential investigation or pass complaints on to another public body if they are serious enough, and that if it finds anything wrong and has enough evidence it might ask a court to close a company down or disqualify the company’s directors. It might also carry out a criminal investigation if it finds the company has committed an offence.

However, Andrew Painton of the Facebook victim support group tells me that he has twice complained to the Insolvency Service about DMB Solutions, but on each occasion received only a standard response saying that the service was not considering an investigation against the company. Moreover, the Insolvency Service advises that if a company has already gone into administration, into receivership or is being liquidated, complaints need to be directed to the official receiver or insolvency practitioner. I have emailed them myself, but to date have not had a response.
Trading standards—which appears to have done nothing when it had the chance to do so—is now acting as if it is responsible. It is doing so in concert with Action Fraud and the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau, which does not appear to me to have any obvious role in such a situation. My constituents are confused and they need clarity about who is responsible for ensuring enforcement of the law against the directors of DMB Solutions. In short, it is all about as clear as mud.

While I do not, of course, expect the Minister to accept any responsibility for the collapse of DMB Solutions, I do hope he will be able to set out, clearly and authoritatively, which public body or bodies are now responsible for gathering evidence from my constituents and considering what action needs to be taken against the directors of the company. I would also like to know whether the Minister agrees that the Department should do more to ensure that members of the public have access to reliable, accurate information when such problems arise. People need to know which body to turn to, and what they can expect that body to do, first, when they experience such shockingly poor service by a private sector business—as numerous customers of DMB Solutions clearly did for at least a year before the company collapsed—and, secondly, when, as in this case, a business goes into liquidation and the directors apparently disappear.

More particularly, on behalf of my constituents, I would like the Minister to answer the following questions. If the Insolvency Service is responsible, is it good enough to have a few sparse paragraphs of so-called guidance for members of the public hidden away on a corner of its website? I do not think it is. Could there not be a single, well signposted and advertised point of contact—a one-stop shop—for members of the public who fall victim to the poor business practices and eventual collapse of a limited company like DMB Solutions? Is there perhaps a role for the Citizens Advice consumer helpline here? Currently, the helpline appears to refer only to trading standards, but what if trading standards is not the appropriate enforcement body, as we have been told it is not in this case? Could the appropriate enforcement body, whichever it is, be facilitated and resourced to take a more proactive approach to ensuring that, in such a situation, directors of a failed company are disqualified from acting as directors in future if there are grounds for such disqualification?

I appreciate that there are a number of questions, but I greatly look forward to hearing the Minister’s response, not least because many families and individuals in my constituency are depending on it.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) to respond to the debate.

10.19 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for such a lengthy and erudite introduction. I expected nothing less, and I was not disappointed.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) has brought a serious matter to the House, and I thank her for raising this important issue. I am also grateful for the interventions and contributions from the hon. Members for Hove (Peter Kyle) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). We have heard terrible stories about their constituents. I have to say that I was not surprised, however. I had heard such stories before, being an occasional reader of the Brighton Argus, and I know that the hon. Lady is not just describing a one-off here. It is the job of the Insolvency Service, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the entire trading standards system to do what they can to provide recompense for her constituents.

**Peter Kyle:** I am pleased to hear that the Minister reads the Brighton and Hove Argus. He has mentioned several of the agencies that people can turn to in these situations, but is it not the case that the landscape of regulation is very complicated? The constituents that we have been describing today simply do not think that any one agency has a grip on such situations.

**Richard Harrington:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I hope that I will be able to partly satisfy him with the comments that I am going to make. If not, I will be happy to meet him and the hon. Lady, Lady, representing the Greater Brighton constituencies, to take up any further points.

The insolvency regime is an important part of the framework of business, even though it has to deal with the unintended consequences of it. To put this into perspective, levels of insolvency are low, but when it does happen—particularly in consumer-facing companies such as this building company—it can have a significant impact on customers, employees and suppliers. It is an unfortunate fact of life that companies sometimes have to cease trading without paying their debts, and that when they do, creditors can often suffer, with little or no chance of receiving their money back. This is exacerbated in circumstances such as these when customers have paid for work in advance, because those people have often saved for some considerable time to have improvements made to their house, for example.

In many cases, insolvency proceedings such as liquidation will follow. These allow an expert in insolvency, who is authorised and bonded, to be appointed to oversee an orderly winding-up of the company’s affairs, to sell its assets and to make dividend payments to creditors from the funds available. It is an important principle of the insolvency regime that unsecured creditors rank equally when it comes to receiving such payments. Only certain creditors, such as employees, are paid in priority.

Hon. Members will appreciate that I cannot comment specifically on the liquidation of DMB at this early stage of the proceedings. The liquidators have an important task to carry out in winding up the company and making such reports to the creditors as are appropriate. I am aware that complaints have been made to trading standards—

**Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP):** Will the Minister give way?

**Richard Harrington:** I hope that the hon. Gentleman will bear with me. I do not want to run out of time without having tried properly to answer all the questions. If there is time left at the end, I will be delighted to give way to him.
I am aware that complaints have been made to trading standards, and we will have to wait for that authority to reach its conclusions. In the meantime, however, we are not sitting idly by. All traders are subject to consumer protection regulations which, for example, require them to provide clear and full information and allow consumers to unwind a contract if they have been the victim of a misleading commercial practice. It is right that any alleged breaches of those regulations should in the first instance be reported to trading standards.

I will set out how the regime impacts on creditors. The first thing to say is that directors who do not play by the rules can expect to be held accountable. It is a long-established principle of company law that directors must act in the best interests of their company, but once the company approaches insolvency, their first duty must be to the creditors. I note from the hon. Members’ comments that, in this case, some of the money was paid a few days before insolvency. Without speaking specifically about this firm, I can say that that is highly relevant to the possible actions open to the authorities. I will say more about that in a moment.

In the majority of company insolvencies, the law is obeyed. Once it has been established that the company cannot pay its debts, a responsible director should take steps to protect creditors, and if a solution to the problem cannot be found, the company may enter into formal insolvency proceedings.

However, not all directors are that diligent. Sometimes, they bury their heads in the sand and continue to run the company as if nothing has happened, or they try to use money owed to creditors as working capital, rather than paying their own salaries. In those few cases, the position of creditors, such as customers who have paid for work in advance, may deteriorate, which would seem to be the case here, given what we have been told. Such directors may be subject to disqualification proceedings, which if successful will prevent them from acting as a director of a company, whether formally appointed or not, for a period of between two and 15 years.

The Government are responsible for disqualification of unfit directors via the Insolvency Service, which assesses insolvent company cases to decide whether to investigate the conduct of the directors and, where appropriate, seek disqualification orders. A person who acts as a director while disqualified is committing a criminal offence and, further, they are personally liable for any debts of a company incurred while they were breaching the disqualification.

Caroline Lucas: The people who have been affected have already contacted the Insolvency Service, which has said that it will not investigate, so where do they go now?

Richard Harrington: At this juncture, the hon. Lady and her constituents have to accept that this is the beginning of the proceedings.

An investigation may lead to evidence of criminal offences committed by directors, such as fraud. In those cases, directors may face prosecution as well as disqualification proceedings. All that will usually start—this is the relevant point—with the receipt of a report on the conduct of the directors of an insolvent company, which must be submitted by the liquidator within three months of their appointment. Having said that, in deciding whether there should be an investigation, all sources of information will be considered, including information from creditors of the company, its customers, its records and other agencies. If the hon. Lady’s constituents have information about the conduct of the directors of DMB—it appears that they certainly do—that they feel would help to decide whether there should be further investigation, they may, and should, submit it to the Insolvency Service, which has a link on its website for precisely that purpose.

Rogue directors will also discover that they may be personally liable for a company’s debts if it traded while they knew, or ought to have known, that it was insolvent and creditors suffered as a result. While I cannot comment on this particular case, if the circumstances that the hon. Lady described are correct—I have every reason to believe that they are because they are based on what her constituents have told her—the firm was trading when the directors knew or ought to have known that the company was insolvent, and creditors have suffered. A court can order that they repay money to the company out of their own pockets if it can be shown that their actions, or inaction, have harmed creditors. In this situation, the directors would have breached their duty to the creditors of the company, which has the serious effect of preventing the directors from hiding behind the normal veil of incorporation that is a limited company.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Richard Harrington: I am going to run out of time, so I will continue. I ought to emphasise again at this point that I cannot comment specifically on the case of DMB or indeed the conduct of its directors.

I mentioned earlier that the Government continue to look for ways to strengthen regulatory and enforcement systems, and disqualification is one area where there have been recent improvements. From 2015, the powers of the Insolvency Service to investigate have been expanded, and the system for liquidators reporting on the conduct of the directors has been modernised, allowing for quicker and more efficient investigations. In addition, there is a new process whereby if a director is disqualified, and it can be shown that their actions caused the company to become insolvent or indeed the conduct of its directors.

The insolvency of a construction company such as DMB may often result in some customers having paid for work that it was not possible to complete. It is not unusual to ask the customer for a proportion of the payment up front, such as in the circumstances described by the hon. Members tonight. Those circumstances may be different from insolvencies that may happen when directors behave perfectly properly and get into financial difficulties, but I will not describe that as the “normal” way, because few companies do become insolvent. There are things that become a serious matter of misconduct on the part of directors and that lead to periods of disqualification, personal liability and possibly prosecution proceedings being sought.

Caroline Lucas: Apparently, we have a couple more minutes. The Minister says there is provision to get a court to order a pay-out from people’s own pockets. Does that still apply if it was a limited company?
Richard Harrington: I believe that is the case, but I do not want inadvertently to mislead the House, so I will write to the hon. Lady on that subject to answer specifically and properly.

I am genuinely sorry, as anybody would be, for the hon. Lady’s constituents following this business with DMB. It is a horrible situation, but I reassure her and other Members that there will be full consideration of whether there should be further investigation of the circumstances of this insolvency. [Interruption.] I have been given a piece of paper saying that the answer to her question is, “Yes, it does.” I will write to her anyway, because I promised that I would.

I have craved your indulgence enough, Mr Speaker—I think I have one minute left—and I hope I have been able to reassure the hon. Lady that the insolvency legislation is robust in dealing with directors who abuse the principle of limited liability. If she and her Brigtonian, Hovian and Portsladian colleague, the hon. Member for Hove, would like to meet me or the relevant officials, I am happy for them to do so.

Paul Girvan: Is it possible for protected creditors, such as Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs in respect of VAT, to allow flexibility for those who are in most need? We are sometimes talking about the widow’s mite here.

Richard Harrington: That is not currently the situation. As the hon. Gentleman will know, some creditors are protected above others, such as banks with mortgages, and we have to be careful that companies can legitimately borrow money and pay their taxes.

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) and I would be grateful for the meeting the Minister describes. We will follow up with his office.

Richard Harrington: I apologise for the fact that in some cases I may not have been able to answer as fully as I had hoped.

Question put and agreed to.

10.32 pm
House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Court Closures

1. Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of the effect of court closures on access to justice. [904186]

2. Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of the effect of court closures on access to justice. [904188]

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr David Gauke): Maintaining access to justice is a key principle when changes to the estate are proposed. Before issuing our consultation on court closures in January, we assessed the impact on access to justice— principally, the changes in travel time for court users. The decision to close a court is never taken lightly, and is made only after full public consultation and where we are satisfied that access to justice is maintained. Our reform programme will improve access to justice for many users, while allowing many needs to be met without the need to attend court. Online solutions and video hearings will make access to justice easier.

Ruth George: The Minister’s experience is not happening in my constituency, where Buxton court closed in 2016. Some of my constituents now have to travel 40 miles on a one-and-a-half-hour trip to Chesterfield court. The police say that it now takes them a whole day to take someone to court, whereas it used to take less than half a day, and that is having an impact on the number of offenders they can bring to court and on justice in my area. Please will the Minister take this into account in the current consultation?

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her comments, but we also have to take into account the fact that 41% of courts and tribunals used less than half their available hearing capacity during the financial year 2016-17, and across the country courts are utilised at 58% of their capacity. In those circumstances, where resources are scarce we have to make decisions about the reforms we undertake.

Helen Hayes: I have been raising concerns about the closure of Lambeth county court for the past two years, and the court finally closed in December. My constituents facing the repossession of their homes must now attend Clerkenwell county court, which lawyers report to be a chaotic environment, which is impossible to contact by telephone, where cases and files frequently go missing and where the number of respondents failing to attend is rocketing. When will the Justice Secretary take action to address this unacceptable situation?

Mr Gauke: The reality is that we are undertaking a series of reforms, making much greater use of digital technology and increasing access to online ways of dealing with this. This is an important modernisation that the courts system needs.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Very sadly, we have lost our magistrates court in Kettering, which, I have to say to the Government, was a mistake. It means that magistrates, the police and witnesses are all having to travel further. The closure of court sends a poor signal to the magistracy that they are not valued. Can we get rid of this ridiculous age limit, whereby magistrates have to retire at the age of 70?

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this point, on which I have received representations. This is consistent with what happens elsewhere within the judiciary, but I am conscious that it will continue to be a matter of some debate.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): The Government are continuing to cut court staff, close courts and sign contracts worth millions of pounds for their digitisation programme. These are huge changes, which will have an impact on our courts for decades. Will the Minister promise not to close any more courts or sign contracts until the courts Bill is published and the matter has been debated fully in this Chamber?

Mr Gauke: I hope to be able to bring forward further news on the courts Bill in the near future, but I am not going to give the undertaking the hon. Lady seeks. It is important that we continue to look to get the best out of the resources we have. If that means reforms here in making greater use of digital technology and ensuring that our court estate is as rational and efficient as possible, we will need to continue to do that.

Vulnerable Witnesses

3. Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the time taken to bring to court criminal cases involving vulnerable witnesses. [904189]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I understand that the hon. Gentleman has a great interest in this area and did a lot of work when he was the police and crime commissioner of Greater Manchester, calling for a review of how victims and witnesses are treated in the criminal justice system. It is right that cases come to court as quickly as possible, and timeliness in the criminal courts system is improving. The average mean number of days from listing to completion is down from 33 in 2015 to 27 in the third
quarter of 2017. Unfortunately, as he will know, there are particular challenges in relation to sex offences, where it does take longer for cases to come to court.

Tony Lloyd: The Minister is absolutely right that there are complexities in cases of, for example, child sexual abuse or rape. Nevertheless, constant, even legitimate, adjournments in cases can lead to months of delay. Sometimes, it takes years before victims come to court. Victims who are already traumatised by what has happened to them deserve better than to be traumatised by the process. Can we make them a priority?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to be extremely careful with vulnerable witnesses and witnesses in sex cases and ensure that they get justice. We are bringing in and rolling out measures on the taking of their evidence to ensure that they can do that pre-trial and therefore safely, which will speed up justice. As the hon. Gentleman knows and as the Secretary of State has mentioned, we are hoping to introduce the courts Bill, which will ensure the streamlining of justice and do away with unnecessary hearings. Hopefully, that will speed up access to justice.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister further outline what training lawyers receive in the handling of vulnerable witnesses? Does the Department intend to make updates to such training compulsory?

Lucy Frazer: In the family court, all judges have training on dealing with vulnerable witnesses. I am sure that the Crown Prosecution Service has training as well.

Victims and Witnesses: Court Experience

4. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the court experience for victims and witnesses.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): We are committed to improving the experiences of those who have become victims of crime, which is why, by the summer, we will publish our victims strategy, a key aspect of which is how we can improve support for victims as they interact with the criminal justice system.

Alan Mak: I welcome the steps the Government have taken. Does my hon. Friend agree that the video hearing system and other new technologies have the potential not only to improve victims’ experience in court but to increase court capacity?

Dr Lee: My hon. Friend is right. Ensuring that victims of crime are able to give evidence in the easiest possible way is among our highest priorities. The roll-out of new video and audio technology will ensure that courts and their work loads are managed more efficiently.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The serious case review of the appalling sexual abuse of girls and vulnerable adults in Newcastle was published last month. Although it generally praised the actions of local authorities, the police and so on, it also raised significant concerns about how the victims of these appalling crimes were supported and the way they were made to relive harrowing experiences. Will the Minister be responding directly to the Spicer review’s recommendations?

Dr Lee: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The Department is of course aware of that serious case review of the sexual exploitation of children. The details are shocking. Like all the agencies involved, we are looking into ways to continuously improve our service. I shall write to the hon. Lady about whether we will respond directly to that review.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Is the Minister aware of new regulations that the Scottish Government are introducing to exempt domestic abuse victims, recipients of crisis welfare support and those on low incomes from civil court fees? What discussions is he having with the Scottish Government about what lessons he might learn from that process?

Dr Lee: We have plenty to learn from what is happening in Scotland with regard to the way we deal with women who are victims of domestic abuse, and indeed offenders who have been victims of domestic abuse. As the Justice Minister with responsibility for the devolved Administrations, my discussions continue regularly. I look forward to learning from Scotland in future.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Government had plans to legislate to ban alleged domestic abusers from cross-examining their victims in the family courts. Is that still Government policy? If so, when will such a provision be put before the House? Every day that there is a delay, more vulnerable people get tormented in court.

Dr Lee: The right hon. Gentleman is spot on in his analysis. The abuse and coercion of females, invariably by males, through the court process is wrong and not acceptable. We will bring forward details on how we intend to address that in the Bill that is coming later this year.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): The court experience can be a bewildering one—it can often feel like a different planet. That is not helped by the fact that 72% of court judges are men. It is International Women’s Day on Thursday; will the Government commit to a timetable to ensure that 50% of court judges are women?

Dr Lee: The hon. Lady points to something with which I would agree. It would be appropriate if the number of women in that position in our society was greater. I am supporting International Women’s Day by visiting HMP Bronzefield on Thursday evening. I cannot commit to a timetable—the hon. Lady knows that—but I will certainly take away her suggestion.

Unduly Lenient Sentences

5. Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): If he will extend the range of offences that can be appealed for being unduly lenient.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): As the House will be aware, a major change in the law was brought in in 1988 to allow victims to be
able to challenge unduly lenient sentences. At the moment, that applies to the most serious indictable offences, but the Government have recently extended it to a range of terrorist offences.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, but as he well knows the Government have promised for quite some time—including in our manifesto—to extend it to a further range of offences. When will the Government pull their finger out and extend the number of cases that can be appealed for being unduly lenient, as we have been promising for quite some time?

Rory Stewart: As I have already said in my answer, the most serious offences—murder and so on—are already covered by the unduly lenient sentence scheme. We have extended it twice in the past few years, but we are talking very closely to my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General about looking at other opportunities to extend the scheme.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will know that I regularly write to him about unduly lenient and unduly severe sentences, but I never ever seem to get a reply. The fact is that too many women are locked up for non-violent offences for long periods of time, and that is the sort of case that I write to him about. Why do we never get any comeback?

Mr Speaker: It is reassuring to know that I am not the only person to whom the hon. Gentleman regularly writes. I am grateful to him for confirming that important fact on the Floor of the House.

Rory Stewart: To get to the nub of the hon. Gentleman’s question, there is a very serious issue here, which is that it is absolutely true that there are many more women in prison than we would like. The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), is working very hard to reduce that population for exactly the reasons that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): While I welcome the fact that victims can ask for a review in relation to unduly lenient sentences, there is an absolute 28-day limit on that. A criminal case can be very traumatising for victims. Will the Minister consider perhaps introducing a discretion in relation to that 28-day absolute limit?

Rory Stewart: That is a very interesting idea. Perhaps the hon. Lady and I can sit down to discuss that interesting idea in more detail.

Prison Officer Recruitment

6. Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What progress his Department has made on recruiting 2,500 new prison officers.

14. Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What progress his Department has made on recruiting 2,500 new prison officers.

23. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to recruit prison officers.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Skilled professional prison officers are absolutely heart and centre of running good prisons. That is why we have committed to recruiting 2,500 extra prison officers. I am pleased to say that we are now nine months ahead of target on delivering those prison officers.

Andrew Bridgen: I of course welcome the fact that the Government are making progress in recruiting extra prison officers, but will the Minister reassure the House that he is making every effort to retain the services of experienced and long-serving officers who are absolutely essential for mentoring new recruits into the service?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. As my hon. Friend points out, this is not just about numbers. Working in a prison is incredibly challenging, and having the experience and the prison craft to do it is vital, so we are putting incentive schemes in place to try to retain our most experienced staff and to understand, when they do leave, why they are doing so.

Chris Green: There is a huge opportunity for rehabilitation in prisons, which is often not taken. What rehabilitative capacity will this increase in prison officers create?

Rory Stewart: The central objective of bringing in 2,500 extra prison officers is to allow us to pair each individual prison officer with six prisoners, which allows them to develop their individual personal relationship over time through weekly meetings to achieve exactly the rehabilitative and educational objectives needed to reduce reoffending and protect the public.

Tom Pursglove: The redevelopment of Wellingborough prison will provide many new employment opportunities for people across Northamptonshire, including in my constituency, but what are the Government doing to attract local people into the profession and to encourage them to stay in the role—including, for example, former members of the armed forces?

Rory Stewart: I am very pleased that this has been raised. As you will be aware, Mr Speaker, almost 40% of prison officers traditionally came from the armed forces, but that number has fallen. We are now working very closely with the Ministry of Defence to explain what an interesting career this can be, and we are doing a lot of advertising. But the most important thing we can do is remind people that, as we have all seen when meeting prison officers, although it is a very challenging and sometimes quite difficult career it also can be a deeply fulfilling one, and we would like to encourage many more people to come forward into the profession.

15. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What effect does the Minister think the shortage of prison officers has on the number of suicides and the amount of self-harm in prisons?

Rory Stewart: There are a number of drivers of suicide and self-harm, of which the number of staff is one. There are other questions around the estate, but probably the largest single driver that we have seen since 2011 is the use of new psychotropic drugs that are creating extraordinary psychotic episodes and leading to a direct increase in violence. We must address those drugs.
Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Government’s recruitment drive is welcome, but is it not truly that we are just now catching up? The number of staff at Feltham young offenders institution in my constituency has fallen by a third, from 600 in 2013 to 461, which has had a huge impact on the governor and staff. The institution has been deemed unsafe for both staff and prisoners. Is it not time that the Government committed to working closely with staff and the Prison Officers Association to tackle this crisis and ensure that we get back on track with rehabilitation for young offenders?

Rory Stewart: One hundred per cent.—we will be working very closely with prison officers for exactly that reason. As the hon. Lady points out, we must get the numbers right. Those 2,500 extra prison officers will be vital in order to get the 1:6 ratio needed for rehabilitation.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I have listened carefully this morning to the Secretary of State talking about high-security prisons. Ministers talk of finally starting to address the crisis that they made by axing so many prison officers, yet over a third of high-security prisons have actually seen a fall in the number of prison officers since the Department’s so-called recruitment drive began. Will the Minister guarantee that these high-security prisons will have more staff by the next Justice questions?

Rory Stewart: One of the challenges around the high-security estate, particularly in places such as London, has been the employment opportunities. We have put new incentives in place—a signing-on bonus and a retention bonus—to recruit people in London. I am not in a position to guarantee the employment market exactly, but we are making a lot of progress—for example, in recruitment to the high-security Belmarsh Prison in London.

Richard Burgon: I thank the Minister for his answer, but nearly one in four prisons has seen prison officer numbers fall since the Government’s recruitment drive began. Moving on, we have another problem of very experienced officers leaving the service, creating a dangerous cocktail of inexperienced officers and experienced prisoners. In the last year alone, 1,000 prison officers with more than five years’ experience each have left the service. That is the equivalent of more than 5,000 years of experience in the Prison Service lost in the last year alone. Will the Minister guarantee that there will be more prison officers will five years’ experience at the end of the year than there are now?

Rory Stewart: The hon. Gentleman’s fundamental point is right: we need experienced prison officers. It is very difficult working in a prison. We can bring in huge numbers of new junior staff, but it will be difficult to get the kind of results we need unless they have experience. We therefore have a plan whereby we have targeted the prisons that are losing the most experienced officers and we are understanding why that is happening. We are both working with the staff and putting in place financial incentives to retain experienced staff.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The new recruits are certainly welcome, but senior officers are also important. I am told that on certain grades, prison staff acting up to higher roles are paid more than if they accepted the actual promotion. This acts as a disincentive to staff looking to take on more responsibility. Will my hon. Friend look into this anomaly?

Rory Stewart: I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend, particularly on prisons and advocating for the prison population in her constituency. It is absolutely true that there is a strange anomaly in the human resources procedure, and we must tackle it. It cannot make sense that people are paid more to act up than to occupy the role. We want people to have career development and we will focus on the issue immediately.

Prisoner Work Experience

7. John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): How many prisoners have undertaken work experience before release in the last 12 months.

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr David Gauke): In 2016-17, offenders completed 16 million hours of work and there were, on average, 11,200 offenders working in prison workshops. In the same period, 2,048 individuals were released on temporary licence for work-related purposes. The New Futures Network will aim to get even more prisoners working during their sentence and to see that that work leads to employment on release.

John Mann: I know that the Secretary of State is new in office, but people at Ranby Prison have been waiting for two years now to be able to get on with creating the sports facilities that they are capable of building inside—the seating, the dugouts for community sports, and even the changing rooms—but the one thing they have not been given is the Secretary of State’s permission to proceed with doing this commercial work. Could I incentivise him with perhaps a cup of tea afterwards, to concentrate his mind on why he needs to make this decision urgently?

Mr Gauke: Certainly, the prospect of a cup of tea with the hon. Gentleman does concentrate the mind, and I would be delighted to accept his invitation. We are trying to ensure that we have a prison system that encourages people to progress by having opportunities to gain experience of work, and I am keen to do that in this post.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman’s offer is an interesting one. It might also be thought by some to be a divisible proposition.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Secretary of State’s speech this morning and his emphasis on more use of release on temporary licence is extremely welcome and constructive. Will he bear in mind, though, that the Through the Gate programme currently involves careers and employment advice being given only towards the very end of a prisoner’s sentence, whereas all the evidence suggests that that should happen much earlier?

Mr Gauke: I thank the Chair of the Justice Committee for his comments. I do want to look at whether we can expand release on temporary licence and provide these
opportunities more widely. On his second point, I am keen to ensure that we provide as much support as possible and make it clear that there is a second chance for people who have gone to prison. If they abide by the rules and comply with the system, we want to give them the support to turn their lives around.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State consider what can be done to facilitate prisoners in applying for universal credit before they are released, so that they can receive the support of jobcentre and other staff immediately on release to move into paid work as quickly as possible?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Lady raises a good point, and rightly so. I am keen to do precisely as she suggests. A lot of work already goes on in prisons with, for example, work coaches providing this support. Part of the challenge is about access to emails. We need to look very carefully at that because it raises a large number of questions.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Work experience in prison that leads to work on release is proven to reduce reoffending. Does the Secretary of State therefore believe that, while we rightly praise employers who offer ex-offenders work experience, we need to call out those employers who have a blanket ban on employing ex-offenders unrelated to any reasonable or fair risk assessment of doing so?

Mr Gauke: I agree with my hon. Friend. I have seen surveys suggesting that some 50% of employers simply will not engage. It is frustrating that when one speaks to employers who do take on ex-offenders, their experience is frequently very positive indeed. If we can increasingly build a culture whereby these offenders are given that opportunity, that is good for the offenders and good for society, as it will reduce reoffending.

Port Talbot Prison


The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I believe that the hon. Gentleman and I have discussed this issue about five times in the past six weeks. I pay tribute to him for being a very firm advocate for his community. We have listened very carefully to his complaints. A decision on this prison is not likely to be imminent, as construction is not likely to be imminent. I would like to say, however, in addition to having listened to his complaints, that a prison built in the right place in the right way can provide significant economic opportunities for an area.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his answer, but the problem is that the proposed site is right next to residential areas, schools and a care home; is served by very poor transport links; is on a designated enterprise zone; is on marshland; and is restricted by a covenant saying that it can only be used as an industrial park. The Minister must surely agree therefore that the whole idea is a non-starter and should be scrapped with immediate effect.

Rory Stewart: The hon. Gentleman has made those points on a number of occasions. We are listening very carefully. Indeed, two members of our Department travelled to Port Talbot, to a very lively public meeting where those points were made repeatedly. We are listening very carefully to him.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Would there be an answer to the hon. Gentleman’s question on the industrial estate if any new prison fully incorporated the work of ONE3ONE Solutions, which was designed more than six years ago to increase the productive and commercial output of prisoners? The numbers given by the Justice Secretary just now suggest that we have not made much progress in the number of prisoners who are working. Will any new prison include ONE3ONE Solutions, and how are we getting on with prisoners working overall?

Mr Speaker: Particularly if any prospect of their working is in Port Talbot, upon which the question is focused.

Rory Stewart: I look forward very much to meeting my hon. Friend. I want to hear more about ONE3ONE Solutions.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): If a super-prison is built in Port Talbot, there will up to 1,000 more prison places in Wales than there are currently prisoners from Wales. Does the Minister share the Howard League’s concern that Wales is set to become Westminster’s penal colony?

Rory Stewart: I think we ought to be very careful with that kind of language. There are currently about 85,000 prisoners within the estate, so having 1,000 extra prisoners in Wales is not the creation of England’s penal colony.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If that prison is built, will the Minister ensure that its chaplaincy avoids the extraordinary carrying-on that has recently been reported at HMP Brixton?

Rory Stewart: I would like to take this opportunity not to get drawn into the individual case of Brixton, which I am looking at personally, but to pay tribute in general to the work of the chaplaincy—that is the Christian chaplaincy, the Jewish chaplaincy and the five imams I met recently at Belmarsh Prison who are doing extraordinary work with the Muslim community.

Leaving the EU: Legal System

9. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What assessment his Department has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the operation of the legal system in each jurisdiction of the UK.

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr David Gauke): We are seeking a new deep and special partnership with the EU that works for the whole United Kingdom. Of course, Scotland and Northern Ireland have distinct legal systems. That is why, in the negotiations on civil judicial co-operation, market access for our legal services and criminal justice, I want a deal that works for Scotland and Northern Ireland as well as England and Wales. That is also why my Department is
meeting regularly with the devolved Administrations to look at the ways in which our legal and justice systems are affected by EU exit.

Gavin Newlands: Unlike the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, the Scottish Government’s legal continuity Bill gives the Scottish Parliament an enhanced role in scrutinising legal changes to devolved laws due to Brexit. What is the Secretary of State doing to urge his Cabinet colleagues to make similar provision for this Parliament for reserved matters in the EU withdrawal Bill?

Mr Gauke: In terms of what is described as the continuity Bill, I am not sure, in all honesty, how helpful or useful that will prove to be. The reality is that there is very close scrutiny in this House of the measures the Government are taking and the negotiations we are having.

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

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) has the next question, so he does not have long to wait. We are saving him up for the delectation of the House. It will be a short wait.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Is the Secretary of State looking forward to April next year, when each of the jurisdictions across the United Kingdom will be able to fashion and formulate legislation in keeping with the demands and the requirements of the people of the United Kingdom?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman states his position very clearly and forthrightly. As we leave the European Union, new flexibilities will arise for all parts of the United Kingdom.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Unlike the EU withdrawal Bill, the Scottish Government’s legal continuity Bill contains a power to enable devolved law in Scotland to keep pace with EU law after Brexit, where appropriate. Does the Secretary of State agree that similar provisions should be made in the EU withdrawal Bill for reserved matters and for the benefit of the English legal system?

Mr Gauke: The extent to which this Parliament decides that it wishes to replicate provisions of EU law is a matter for this Parliament, and whether or not we put that in the EU withdrawal Bill, that freedom will continue to exist for this Parliament.

Joanna Cherry: Another point of contrast between the Scottish Government’s legal continuity Bill and the EU withdrawal Bill is that the Scottish Government’s Bill incorporates the charter of fundamental rights into Scots law in so far as it applies to devolved matters. What is the Secretary of State doing to make sure that everyone in the United Kingdom keeps their rights guaranteed by the charter, regardless of which jurisdiction they live in?

Mr Gauke: When the charter of fundamental rights was brought in, the argument was made at the time that it was essentially replicating rights set out elsewhere in other parts of EU treaties. To the extent that that fundamentally changes matters, there is certainly a debate to be had about it.

Leaving the EU: UK Legal System

10. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What plans the Government have to ensure that the UK legal system operates effectively after the UK leaves the EU.

20. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What plans the Government have to ensure that the UK legal system operates effectively after the UK leaves the EU.

21. Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): What plans the Government have to ensure that the UK legal system operates effectively after the UK leaves the EU.

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor

Mr Gauke: It is absolutely right that we provide legal certainty for businesses, families and individuals as we leave the European Union. That is why, as the Prime Minister said in her speech on Friday, part of our future partnership with the EU will be to have effective reciprocal arrangements with the EU to deal with cross-border legal disputes in civil and family matters. The best way to deliver that co-operation is with a close and comprehensive agreement between the UK and the EU that sets out coherent common rules.

Jeremy Lefroy: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Leaving the EU is likely to lead to additional workload for the UK legal system. What additional resources have been made available to his Department and to the legal and courts system more generally to ensure that they are fully prepared?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right that we should be prepared. He will be aware that the Treasury has made another £3 billion of extra funding available to Departments for 2018 to 2020. We are in discussion with the Treasury about the allocation for the justice system, and we hope to agree it soon.

John Lamont: As we leave the European Union, many powers over many aspects of our legal and judicial enforcement will return from Brussels. What discussions have the Government had with the Scottish Government on how such policies will be implemented after Brexit, and does the Secretary of State agree that the SNP Government’s disruptive continuity Bill will do nothing but add to the uncertainty in our country?

Mr Gauke: We are committed to securing a deal that works for the entire United Kingdom—for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and all parts of England. The Government expect that the outcome of leaving the EU will significantly increase the decision-making of each devolved Administration. I can tell the House that I wrote to Michael Matheson last month to reaffirm the Department’s commitment to continue meaningful engagement with the Scottish Government.
Stephen Hammond: Professional services, including legal services, are clearly one of the key exports of this country. What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that there will be new arrangements for the recognition of legal standards and qualifications?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend raises a good question. We recognise that this is an important right to protect UK nationals, so that they can continue with their chosen line of work. It has already been agreed that those who have received a recognition decision or applied for one before the withdrawal date will be able to have their qualifications recognised after exit, including lawyers. Talks on many key issues, including the mutual recognition of professional qualifications, will continue into the next phase of negotiations. We will seek to reach an agreement with the EU on parts of MRPQ that are not seen as in scope of the withdrawal negotiations, such as home title practice. The Prime Minister has been clear that she wants EU nationals in the UK and UK nationals in the EU to be able to continue their lives broadly as now.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) has a not wholly dissimilar inquiry at Question 19, and he is welcome to come in on this question if he is so inclined, because we are not likely to reach Question 19.

19. [904206] Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I would be delighted to do so. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

As the Prime Minister has made a number of concessions with regard to the European Court of Justice after Brexit and given that the Scottish Government’s legal continuity Bill provides that, when exercising devolved jurisdiction, Scottish courts may have regard to the decisions of the ECJ, is it not time to amend clause 6 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill to the same effect?

Mr Gauke: On clause 6 and this question more widely, let us be clear: we are leaving the EU, so the jurisdiction of the ECJ will end, but EU law and the decisions of the ECJ will continue to affect us. For a start, the ECJ determines whether agreements the EU has struck are legal under the EU’s own law. If, as part of our future partnership, Parliament passes an identical law to an EU law, it makes sense for our courts to look at the appropriate ECJ judgments, so that we interpret those laws consistently. We have to remember, however, that our Parliament will remain ultimately sovereign. It could decide not to accept such rules, but there would be consequences for our membership of the relevant agencies and linked market access rights.

Private Sector Probation Companies

11. Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment has he made of the performance of private sector probation companies.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): There have been a number of challenges with the community rehabilitation companies—CRCs—particularly in transition. It is not all bad news: in fact, the number of people reoffending has come down by 2% and certain CRCs, such as Cumbria and my own county, are performing well. But we need to focus particularly on the questions of assessment, planning and meeting, and that is what we have focused on in the report on London that is due on Thursday.

Alex Norris: Her Majesty’s inspectorate of probation recently warned that private sector probation companies’ focus on contract compliance rather than the true quality of supervision was inevitably having an impact on culture and was undermining the established values of probation professionals. Does the Minister agree that it is time to put proper probation ahead of private profit?

Rory Stewart: The hon. Gentleman is a Nottingham Member, and I had a very interesting meeting with the CRC last week on my visit to Nottingham Prison, where the CRC is providing very good Through The Gate services—in fact, services for prisoners in prison that did not exist before the transformation reforms. Before, they were outside the prisons. I do not believe this is a question whether it is done by the private sector, the public sector or the voluntary sector, but it is a question of getting the basic standards right. As I say, that is exactly what we will be assessing the London CRC on on Thursday.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Putting it bluntly, probation privatisation has been a disaster. Despite that, the Government are still pursuing their privatisation agenda. Last week, the Government outsourced night staff in probation hostels. Given that those hostels house some of the most dangerous ex-offenders, will the Minister accept full responsibility for any impact on public safety resulting from that ideological outsourcing?

Rory Stewart: The shadow Minister refers to a decision by the National Probation Service—which is a Government-run service, so it is not a CRC service—to bring in additional contracted staff to provide double night duty in the hostels. That has been done because it is not work that is traditionally done by trained probation officers, but by contracted staff. Of course I will accept full responsibility for that decision.

Supreme Court Judgment: Metropolitan Police Commissioner

12. Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Whether he has discussed with the Home Secretary the implications for Government policies of the Supreme Court judgment on the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis v. DSD and another.

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr David Gauke): This case is a matter for the Home Office and the police. However, I understand that the Home Office is working closely with the National Police Chiefs Council to understand the impact of the ruling and monitor current claims.

Louise Haigh: Failures to disclose digital evidence have led to the collapse of four rape trials in recent months. Does the Secretary of State agree that, in the light of the landmark ruling on the Worboys case, the lack of digital capacity now exposes the police to huge financial liability and risks breaching the human rights
of victims on an unprecedented scale? Will he make representations to the Home Office to carry out a full resource impact assessment of the decision?

Mr Gauke: As the Attorney General has said, disclosure in cases is a question of public authorities performing the roles that they should and doing their jobs properly. Clearly, it is of great concern that there have been cases in which that appears not to have happened.

Service Animals

13. Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of creating a specific offence of attacking service animals.

Mr Gauke: As the Attorney General has said, disclosure in cases is a question of public authorities performing the roles that they should and doing their jobs properly. Clearly, it is of great concern that there have been cases in which that appears not to have happened.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I would like to express, as I am sure would the whole House, our immense gratitude for the role that service animals play and have played for a long time in public life. They frequently do things that humans would not do, ranging from detection of bombs and drugs to taking on violent criminals. There are serious aggravating circumstances that a judge can take into account when sentencing, and serious sentences can be given to anyone attacking a service animal—that is absolutely right.

Stephen McPartland: Police dog Finn was brutally stabbed several times in my constituency while apprehending a violent criminal. The current law treats police dog Finn, a canine hero, like a piece of computer equipment—the charge is criminal damage. This is unacceptable. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) is leading a campaign to introduce Finn’s law. Will the Minister agree to meet me and my right hon. and learned Friend, so that we can provide greater protection for our service animals in the course of their duty?

Rory Stewart: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and others for the very active campaign that they are leading. I would of course be delighted to meet them to discuss this kind of action, but I would be delighted to discuss the issue in more detail with the right hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friends.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Given that Canada, America, Australia and many European Union states have a law similar to that being introduced by the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire—I am a sponsor of his Bill—why did the Minister order the Government to block the Bill last Friday?

Rory Stewart: As we have discussed, very significant sentences of up to 10 years can already be imposed for this kind of action, but I would be delighted to discuss the issue in more detail with the right hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friends.

Mr Speaker: Perhaps we could have an Adjournment debate about Finn, if the right hon. and learned Gentleman has not already procured such.

Sir Oliver Heald: I have already done that, Mr Speaker, and I have a ten-minute rule Bill as well.

Mr Speaker: Very well done. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is obviously ahead of events. I was enjoying the family history he was educating us on just now.

Rory Stewart: My right hon. and learned Friend is a great authority on the law. There are a number of issues here, ranging from the exact sentences that can be imposed to the work my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is doing to introduce new sentences for animal cruelty. I look forward to discussing all those issues both in the House and over a cup of tea.

Violence and Self-harm in Prison

16. Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the levels of violence and self-harm in prisons.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): Health services are commissioned by NHS England, which is responsible for assessing provision of mental health treatment in prisons in England. In Wales, health is devolved to the Welsh Government and separate arrangements are made for assessment.

Mr Speaker: I think the Minister might be a bit confused. I have the impression that he is answering a question that would have been put if the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) had not been called earlier on a different question. The question with which we are now dealing is Question 16, on levels of violence and self-harm.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): My apologies, Mr Speaker.

There have been worrying increases in levels of violence and self-harm. As was said earlier, a lot of that is being driven by new drugs inducing psychotic episodes. We are working hard on this issue. We have provided training to an additional 14,000 prison officers focused on issues of violence and self-harm. More staffing will help, but there is much more to do.

Tracy Brabin: The Minister will be aware that incidences of self-harm in prisons have risen by 75% since 2007. I appreciate the Minister giving us the drivers of violence and self-harm in prisons, but will he tell us in more detail what steps he will take to reduce the amount of
self-harm and suicide? Does he agree that part of the solution is encouraging the use of mental health treatment requirements, which has fallen by 48%?

Rory Stewart: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct that mental health is at the heart of a lot of these issues. On the concrete steps we are taking, one is the training for 14,000 additional officers and the second is the proper use of the ACCT—assessment, care in custody and teamwork—strategy, which is the process for assessing the risk posed to the prisoner and coming up with a plan to deal with it. We have managed to significantly reduce suicide over the past 18 months, but the level is still far too high. Any death is a great tragedy, and we will continue to work very closely to reduce suicide further.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Sixty-two years ago, Bessie Braddock, the then MP for Liverpool Exchange division, stood in this Chamber and raised concerns about the appalling conditions at Liverpool Prison—then called Walton Prison—and particularly the treatment of prisoners with mental illness. In the past two years at that very same prison, seven inmates have taken their life, including Tony Paine two weeks ago. I note that the Minister said on 22 February that the conditions at the prison were “very disturbing” and “unacceptable”. What action is he going to take today to ensure that all prisoners’ mental health needs are adequately met and that no other prisoner takes their life in one of our prisons?

Rory Stewart: As the hon. Lady mentions, the situation at Liverpool Prison was very disturbing. I have visited Liverpool Prison, and mental health provision is now significantly better than it was at the time of the inspection—I spent quite a lot of time with the mental health staff there—but there is a broader issue. Although we are reducing suicide, there is still far too much of it happening. A lot of this will be about making sure not only that we deal with drugs, but that we have the right kind of purposeful activity in prisons, so that prisoners do not feel the temptation to take their own life.

Legal Aid

17. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What research his Department has conducted on the cost-effectiveness of providing legal aid for early legal help.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the value of early legal advice, which is why the Department spent £100 million in legal aid on early legal advice for civil cases last year.

Kerry McCarthy: Citizens Advice has estimated that for every £1 of legal aid spending on housing advice the state would save over £2, and that if the advice was on debt and housing, it would save even more. Will the Minister commit to commissioning research into the cost-effectiveness of reintroducing early legal advice in the housing sector, so that we can save money in the long run?

Lucy Frazer: Advice can already be taken through a telephone hotline in relation to housing. Legal aid is available where homelessness is a risk, and debt leads to homelessness. A whole variety of early legal advice is available through legal aid at the moment, but as the hon. Lady will know, we are conducting a review of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, and this issue will be considered.

Family Contact for Prisoners

18. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What recent steps his Department has taken to increase family contact for prisoners.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Reducing reoffending is above all about having healthy relationships between the individual and their family, the individual and society, and the individual and the state, so having that relationship with the family is vital. That is partly, of course, about the prisoners’ entitlement to two visits a month. There have been some excellent examples in Liverpool—for example, at Altcourse Prison, with its fantastic family centre for meeting family—and it is also about having telephony in place to keep those contacts up.

Maria Caulfield: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he agree with the findings in the Conservative-led strengthening families manifesto, which found that if family contact is maintained, reoffending can be reduced by more than 39%?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. Getting that family relationship right and embedding people properly with their family is vital to reducing reoffending, along with many of the measures we take on education.

Topical Questions

T1. Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr David Gauke): For prisons to be effective, we must get the basics right. This means creating prisons that are safe, secure and decent. It also means tackling the ringleaders of serious organised crime, so that they cannot continue to profit from their crimes and ruin people’s lives through drugs, deaths and violence from behind bars. I can announce that we are investing an extra £14 million to tackle serious organised crime. This includes creating new intelligence and serious organised crime teams to support work with the National Crime Agency, and enhancing our intelligence and information-gathering capacity across the country. I will also look at how we categorise prisoners to make sure that we are using our most secure prisons to tackle ongoing criminality behind bars. At the same time, we will reset the system of incentives in our prisons, so that they work much more in the favour of prisoners who play by the rules and want to turn their lives around, while coming down harder on those who show no intention of doing so.

Mr Speaker: Order. Too long.

Priti Patel: The number of foreign national offenders from EU countries in our prisons remains at around 4,000. As part of the negotiations on leaving the EU, is my right hon. Friend liaising with other Government Departments, including the Home Office and the
Department for Exiting the European Union, to ensure that we can deport more of the thousands of EU nationals who are in our prisons and remove these dangerous people from Britain?

**Mr Gauke:** Since 2010 we have removed more than 40,000 foreign national offenders from our prisons, immigration removal centres and the community. A range of removal mechanisms exist that enable foreign offenders to be returned to their home countries, and we are working closely with the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Home Office as we consider our future criminal justice arrangements with the EU, with the aim of carrying on our close working relationship.

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): In a formal statement, the previous Secretary of State for Justice said that the Grenfell inquiry would “get to the truth and see justice done”. For that to be the case, Grenfell survivors and the bereaved families must have full confidence in it, so to tackle the obvious current lack of trust, does the Minister agree with survivors and bereaved families who are calling for a broad inquiry panel, as there was in the watershed inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence?

**Mr Gauke:** I believe that the processes have been set up, that the inquiry led by Sir Martin Moore-Bick is the right approach and that the focus should be on ensuring that the inquiry can make progress rather than trying in any way to undermine it.

T2. [904212] **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Family law has been in need of reform for far too long. We now have a situation where the judiciary is supporting early intervention and wishing to carry out a pilot scheme. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how to make this excellent solution a reality?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer):** I am very aware of the importance of looking at family law, in the context of the fact that relationship breakdown leads to unwelcome life chances for the children of that relationship. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend, who should know that I have already met the president of the family division and the chief executive of the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, and to discuss this issue.

T5. [904215] **Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): As the Minister knows, there has already been a public meeting in my constituency about the prison there. He will be delighted to know that we have organised another on 12 April, to which he has been invited. May I encourage him to come and meet my constituents to hear directly their concerns, and I can guarantee that he will receive a warm welcome in the valleys?

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart):** I am very grateful. There is almost no Member of Parliament who has been more assiduous on this subject, with, I think, five meetings in the past six weeks. There was a vigorous encounter between my officials and the hon. Gentleman’s community on their last visit. I would like very much to have the next meeting here in London, if that is possible, and I would be delighted to discuss the issues on that occasion.

T3. [904213] **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): The Torbay offender management team works to reduce crime and prevent those released from prison from reoffending. What assessment has the Lord Chancellor made of its effectiveness in preventing crime in Torbay?

**Rory Stewart:** That is an interesting example of a community rehabilitation company in Devon and Cornwall. The particular strengths of the Torbay approach seem to us to be in the partnership working with the police and children’s services and in the work done with Catch22 on accommodation.

T7. [904217] **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): In December, the previous Prisons Minister wrote to me saying that the spate of deaths at HMP Nottingham was a random occurrence, blaming a phenomenon called “suicide cluster”. In January, an inspection of the prison deemed it fundamentally unsafe. Last month there was another death, reported to be a suicide. Will Ministers now accept that there is nothing random going on at this jail and that it is not a safe environment?

**Rory Stewart:** As the hon. Gentleman will know, I had a serious visit to HMP Nottingham last week. I pay tribute to the prison officers and the governor for their work, but there are a number of serious challenges in the prison. We are particularly focused on safety. We have a new manager in place and a new violence reduction strategy, and the ACCT process will be central to solving these problems.

T4. [904214] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): I am sure that in 100 years’ time people will look at our prisons in the same way as we look at Victorian prisons—as being cruel and locking up too many people with health problems. One thing we could do is clear out of our prisons people serving less than a year. It does no good, they are moved around and they cannot be trained. Will the Minister look at that?

**Rory Stewart:** It is absolutely true that many of the serious challenges we have been discussing in the House today, particularly on violence, self-harm and drug use, focus on the population imprisoned for less than 12 months. The more we can do to try to rehabilitate people in the community while protecting the public the better.

T9. [904219] **Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Since 2010, six successive Courts Ministers have dodged a decision over the future of Sunderland’s court estate. Despite more than £2 million having been spent on preparations for a new centre for justice, a further £284,000 will now be spent on urgent repairs to the city’s crumbling magistrates courts as a result of that unacceptable delay. Will the new Minister meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) to see whether we can put an end to this saga and give the people of Sunderland a decision at last?

**Lucy Frazer:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. It was a pleasure to meet her recently to discuss the issue, and I am grateful to her for following up with an email on Friday. I am very happy to meet her again to discuss the issue, and I have sent her a letter today, as I
said I would, setting out a timetable for the consideration of sites. When she has had a chance to look at that I am happy to meet her again.

T6. [904216] Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as he reforms the justice system, a system of incentives could help prisoners with good behaviour records and reduce reoffending in the future?

Mr Gauke: I very much agree. Indeed, I advanced that argument this morning in a speech to the Royal Society of Arts. If prisoners are abiding by the rules and complying with what is required of them, governors should have more flexibility to reward them with additional privileges. I think that that could help to move people in the right direction and change behaviour in a positive way.

T10. [904218] Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The most recent figures from the Department show that only 6% of employment tribunal fees have been repaid, although the Supreme Court declared them unlawful last year. If the Department cannot uphold the law, how can it expect anyone else to?

Lucy Frazer: The Department is responsible for upholding the law, and it does so. As for the specific issue of refunds, the Department has done a great deal of work in trying to explain to interested bodies how they can make a refund. It has written to Citizens Advice, the Law Society, the Bar Council and the Free Representation Unit. New figures will be published on 8 March. If people do not receive refunds, we will continue to liaise with them.

T8. [904218] Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What percentage of inmates currently have literacy problems, and what solutions are the Government coming up with to tackle those problems?

Rory Stewart: Levels of literacy in prisons are shocking. About 54% of prisoners currently have a reading level below that which we would expect in an 11-year-old. Let me put that in context. Nearly 50% of prisoners have been excluded from school at some point, compared with about 2% of the general population. Our solution is to give governors more control of their education budgets, and to ensure that literacy training is available in every prison as part of the core curriculum.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The Minister’s earlier answers to questions about violence in prisons focused on prisoner violence. Our hard-working prison officers face daily violence in their jobs. I have just written to the Minister about a constituent who had urine and excrement poured over him, but let me now ask him a wider question. What is the Department doing to ensure that prison officers are given full support when they are assaulted, and also to ensure that mental health services become better than they are at present?

Rory Stewart: We have a huge obligation to prison officers, particularly when they are assaulted. We can deal with the problem in a number of ways. We need to ensure that prisoners are punished for assaults, and to make it clear that they will be punished. We need to reduce drugs, and we need violence reduction strategies. We are already using more CCTV cameras and body-held cameras to record assaults, but our prison officers must feel safe in their environment. [ Interruption. ]

Mr Speaker: I very much hope that the Foreign Secretary is beetling his way towards the Chamber as I speak, and I dare say that that will be the aspiration of the House. Either the right hon. Gentleman himself or one of his ministerial accomplices is required in the Chamber. We cannot ask the Lord Chancellor to deal with the next business; that would be unreasonable. [ Hon. Members: “Border check!” ] I do not think that the Foreign Secretary is between Islington and Camden. No, I am sure he is not.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: No, I will not take points of order now. I am always interested in the views of the hon. Gentleman, but not now. We will hear from him in due course, and we look forward to that with interest and anticipation. Well done—the hon. Gentleman should stay in his seat, and we will hear from him in due course.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I commend the Prisons Minister for following up his predecessor’s strong support for Lord Farmer’s review. Will he meet me to discuss extending its reach to the welfare of prisoners’ children, especially at the point—[ Interruption. ]

Mr Speaker: Order. It is very good of the Foreign Secretary to drop in on us—we are deeply grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. However, I think that the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) should be given a chance to rephrase her question, because I have interrupted her. Blurt it out from start to finish.

Fiona Bruce: Will the Prisons Minister meet me to discuss the welfare of prisoner’ children, especially at the point of sentencing? There are 200,000 such children a year, and they often fall through the care system completely.

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. One of the most terrifying statistics is the very high number of prisoners’ children who go on to offend themselves. I should be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss not just the issue of families, but the issue of children in particular.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What are the Government doing to reverse the dramatic fall in community sentencing, which has nearly halved in the past decade, with a particularly sharp drop in recent years?

Mr Gauke: We have seen an increased use of suspended sentences, but the hon. Lady is right that we must do more. We want to work closely with community rehabilitation companies and the National Probation Service, because the judiciary must have confidence in non-custodial sentences as well as custodial sentences.

Mr Speaker: The Foreign Secretary is scribbling away with great determination and no little emotion, and we are grateful for that, but I have an appetite to hear a couple more questions—[ Interruption. ] Yes, I want to hear a couple more questions to the Justice Secretary while the Foreign Secretary is recovering his breath.
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): We need compulsory prisoner transfer agreements to send foreign national offenders back to prison in their own country. Are the Government seeking to sign any new such agreements? If so, with which countries?

Mr Gauke: As I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), in the last few years, something like 40,000 foreign national offenders have been returned to their own countries. We continue to seek to sign additional agreements so we can continue to make progress with this.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Will the impact of cuts to legal aid on unaccompanied and separated children under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 be considered?

Lucy Frazer: The purpose of the review is to look at the effectiveness of the legislation, so any changes made by LASPO will be considered.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): So what exactly has happened at the chaplaincy at HMP Brixton?

Rory Stewart: That is a brilliant question. The answer is that I am still trying to get to the bottom of it and I cannot provide an answer to the House.

Mr Speaker: May I exhort the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) for the umpteenth time to circulate his textbook on succinct questions to all colleagues in the House? If he is in a generous mood, he might even offer copies to people sitting in the Public Gallery as well?

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): And to the Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will ignore that sedentary chunter from the hon. Gentleman, which is unworthy of someone of his normal generosity of spirit.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Last week the Justice Committee produced an excellent report highlighting some of the issues around virtual courts. We might have a virtual Foreign Secretary today, but the Committee raised some important issues, so why is the Secretary of State rushing to close courts such as that in Cambridge when we are yet to have a wider discussion about virtual courts?

Mr Gauke: As I said in reply to the very first question of this session, it is important that we make progress in using the court estate as sensibly as possible. It is underused, and when resources are scarce, it is important that we use them more efficiently. It is also right that we make advances in using digital technology so that access to justice becomes easier.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Last weekend a prison officer at HMP Bedford was rushed to hospital with a serious brain injury inflicted by a prisoner. Other serious incidents occurred over the weekend, such as prison officers running for their lives to hide from an out-of-control prisoner. The weekend before, five prison officers were taken to A&E due to injuries inflicted by prisoners. Will a prison officer have to die before this Government act to keep prison staff safe in the line of duty?

Mr Gauke: The events in Bedford at the weekend were deeply disturbing and the sympathy of the whole House goes out to that prison officer and his family. Violence against prison officers is at an unacceptable level. There were 8,000 incidents last year and, as I set out in a speech this morning, we must take this incredibly seriously. We must recognise that the driver of a lot of this violence is drugs, and that the driver of a lot of drugs in prison is serious organised crime. I want to ensure we do everything we can to address that, because prison officers do a great job and it is far too dangerous for them.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): With the support of Co-operative Funeralcare, Dignity plc, the National Association of Funeral Directors, the bereavement charity Cruse and the all-party group on baby loss, 50 bereaved parents in Hull are still seeking an independent inquiry into what happened to their babies’ ashes. Does the Minister still stand by Hull City Council, which has refused to have that independent inquiry?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): This situation was truly appalling—the hon. Lady knows that I think that. The review was comprehensive, so I will not be changing any decisions any time soon. My heart goes out to all those involved, as clearly this was very traumatic, but the review was comprehensive.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Instead of carrying out their in-house review of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, should Ministers not follow the excellent example of the Scottish Government by having an independent review of legal aid, and perhaps looking at how the Scottish scheme has managed to achieve greater scope and eligibility but with lower costs?

Lucy Frazer: The review of legal aid will be important. We will be inviting a number of independent experts to give evidence so that we can make the necessary decisions.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will know that even in the best justice systems there are miscarriages of justice. Will he therefore pay attention to the fact that so many people who are later found to be innocent and have their sentences quashed, having spent years in prison, never get any compensation?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. If he wants to raise a specific case, I am happy to meet him to discuss it.
Government Policy on Russia

12.41 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Her Majesty’s Government’s policy towards Russia.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) for raising this important matter. Although he asks a general question about Russia, let me immediately say that there is much speculation about the disturbing incident in Salisbury, where a 66-year-old man, Sergei Skripal, and his 33-year-old daughter Yulia were found unconscious outside The Maltings shopping centre on Sunday afternoon. Police, together with partner agencies, are now investigating.

Hon. Members will note the echoes of the death of Alexander Litvinenko in 2006. Although it would be wrong to prejudge the investigation, I can reassure the House that, should evidence emerge that implies state responsibility, Her Majesty’s Government will respond appropriately and robustly, although I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will appreciate that it would not be right for me to give further details of the investigation now, for fear of prejudicing the outcome.

This House has profound differences with Russia, which I outlined in the clearest terms when I visited Moscow in December. By annexing Crimea in 2014, igniting the flames of conflict in eastern Ukraine and threatening western democracies, including by interfering in their elections, Russia has challenged the fundamental basis of international order.

The United Kingdom, under successive Governments, has responded with strength and determination, first by taking unilateral measures after the death of Litvinenko, expelling four Russian diplomats in 2007 and suspending security co-operation between our respective agencies, and then by leading the EU’s response to the annexation of Crimea and the aggression in Ukraine by securing tough sanctions, co-ordinated with the United States and other allies, targeting Russian state-owned banks and defence companies, restricting the energy industry that serves as the central pillar of the Russian economy, and constraining the export of oil exploration and production equipment.

Whenever those sanctions have come up for renewal, Britain has consistently argued for their extension, and we shall continue to do so until and unless the cause for them is removed. These measures have inflicted significant damage on the Russian economy. Indeed, they help to explain why it endured two years of recession in 2015 and 2016.

As the House has heard repeatedly, the UK Government have been in the lead at the UN in holding the Russians to account for their support of the barbaric regime of Bashar al-Assad. The UK has been instrumental in supporting Montenegro’s accession to NATO and in helping that country to identify the perpetrators of the Russian-backed attempted coup. This country has exposed the Russian military as cyber-criminals in its attacks on Ukraine and elsewhere.

As I said, it is too early to speculate about the precise nature of the crime or attempted crime that took place in Salisbury on Sunday, but Members will have their suspicions. If those suspicions prove to be well founded, this Government will take whatever measures we deem necessary to protect the lives of the people in this country, our values and our freedoms. Though I am not now pointing fingers, because we cannot do so, I say to Governments around the world that no attempt to take innocent life on UK soil will go either unsanctioned or unpunished. It may be that this country will continue to pay a price for our continued principles in standing up to Russia, but I hope that the Government will have the support of Members on both sides of the House in continuing to do so. We must await the outcome of the investigation, but in the meantime I should like to express my deep gratitude to the emergency services for the professionalism of their response to the incident in Salisbury.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Unfortunately, the Foreign Secretary arrived slightly later than scheduled and addressed the House for slightly longer than the time limit allows, but by virtue of my generosity of spirit, he has thus far escaped unsanctioned in respect of either offence. His acknowledgement of same would of course be appreciated by the House.

Boris Johnson indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: I must now make some allowance for the shadow Foreign Secretary, Emily Thornberry—[Interruption.] Oh, only once we have heard from Mr Tugendhat; I am ahead of myself.

Tom Tugendhat: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is good of you to have accorded this urgent question.

I welcome my right hon. Friend’s tour of the world and of the various abuses from Russia that we are dealing with at the moment. Though it is, as he rightly says, too soon to point fingers at Moscow regarding what happened in Salisbury, it is quite clear that we are seeing a pattern in Russian behaviour. Indeed, BuzzFeed’s Heidi Blake, a journalist who has been researching this subject intensively over a number of years, has come up with 14 deaths that she attributes to Russian elements, and there are others who have pointed this out. Only today, Shashank Joshi, a researcher at the Royal United Services Institute, indicated that murder is a matter of public policy in Russia today. My right hon. Friend’s ministerial colleague, the Minister for Europe and the Americas, was also absolutely right to criticise the murder of Boris Nemtsov only recently.

We are seeing a pattern of what the KGB would refer to as “demoralise, destabilise, bring to crisis and normalise”, so does my right hon. Friend agree that Russia is now conducting a form of soft war against the west, that its use of so-called fake news—more often known as propaganda and information warfare—is part of that, and that this requires a whole-of-Government response, which his Department is best placed to lead?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is indeed correct that Russia is engaged in a host of malign activities that stretch from the abuse and murder of journalists to the mysterious assassination of politicians.

Oh, only once we have heard from Mr Tugendhat; I am ahead of myself.

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: [Interruption.]

As I said, it is too early to speculate about the precise nature of the crime or attempted crime that took place in Salisbury on Sunday, but Members will have their suspicions. If those suspicions prove to be well founded, this Government will take whatever measures we deem necessary to protect the lives of the people in this country, our values and our freedoms. Though I am not now pointing fingers, because we cannot do so, I say to Governments around the world that no attempt to take innocent life on UK soil will go either unsanctioned or unpunished. It may be that this country will continue to pay a price for our continued principles in standing up to Russia, but I hope that the Government will have the support of Members on both sides of the House in continuing to do so. We must await the outcome of the investigation, but in the meantime I should like to express my deep gratitude to the emergency services for the professionalism of their response to the incident in Salisbury.
I am glad that he mentioned Mr Nemtsov, as in December I was privileged to pay tribute to his memory at the site of his murder on a bridge in Moscow.

It is clear that Russia is, I am afraid, in many respects now a malign and disruptive force, and the UK is in the lead across the world in trying to counteract that activity. I must say to the House that that is sometimes difficult, given the strong economic pressures that are exerted by Russia’s hydrocarbons on other European economies, and we sometimes have difficulty in trying to get our points across, but we do get our points across. There has been no wavering on the sanctions regimes that have been imposed by European countries, and nor indeed will there be such wavering as long as the UK has a say in this.

A cross-Government review is an interesting idea that I will take away and consider. As my hon. Friend knows, the National Security Council has repeatedly looked at our relations with Russia, which are among the most difficult that we face in the world. I assure him that we will be looking at it again. We must be very careful in what we say because it is too early to prejudge the investigation, but if the suspicions on both sides of the House about the events in Salisbury prove to be well founded, we may well be forced to look again at our relations with Russia, which are among the most difficult that we face in the world. I assure him of my determination. We must be very interested in trying to address the issue of those people it regards as traitors is in the finest traditions of the KGB, the NKVD, et cetera. Are the measures taken appropriate for us to indulge in speculation while the investigating authorities are still doing their job, so I will not ask the Secretary of State any specific questions about the incident or the Government’s response, although I am sure the time for those questions will come soon.

As the Secretary of State says, the incident has disturbing echoes of the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko 12 years ago, and it comes after the exposure last June by BuzzFeed News of the fact that, since 2012, 14 individuals considered hostile to the Putin regime have died in mysterious circumstances on British soil. However, the investigation of this particular incident in Salisbury has only just begun, and I do not believe it is appropriate for us to indulge in speculation while the investigating authorities are still doing their job, so I will not ask the Secretary of State any specific questions about the incident or the Government’s response, although I am sure the time for those questions will come soon.

I have two related questions for the Secretary of State. He talks about working across Europe in relation to sanctions. As we leave the European Union, how will we continue to work with our European allies on sanctions?

Secondly, on the issue of Russian human rights abuses, the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill is currently upstairs in Committee where, right now, the Government are resisting an amendment that would enable Britain to sanction individuals who perpetrate gross human rights abuses, such as those who tortured Sergei Magnitsky to death in a Moscow jail in 2009. Can the Secretary of State explain why the Government are taking such a negative stance against our Magnitsky amendment? Surely they should be supporting it.

Thirdly, the Secretary of State will, like me, surely have heard President Putin’s speech and have been disturbed to hear Putin boasting about the proficiency of Russia’s new nuclear weapons systems, all in response to Donald Trump’s planned expansion of America’s nuclear arsenal. Both are driving a coach and horses through the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. What are the Government doing to urge all parties to renew their compliance with that vital international treaty?

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), for securing it.

We are all extremely concerned about the incident in Salisbury yesterday, and I am sure we all hope for the recovery of Mr Skripal and his daughter. I am sure both sides of the House will join me in praising the professionalism and frankly, given the nature of previous poisonings, the bravery of the emergency services that dealt with this incident.

As the Secretary of State says, the incident has disturbing echoes of the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko 12 years ago, and it comes after the exposure last June by BuzzFeed News of the fact that, since 2012, 14 individuals considered hostile to the Putin regime have died in mysterious circumstances on British soil. However, the investigation of this particular incident in Salisbury has only just begun, and I do not believe it is appropriate for us to indulge in speculation while the investigating authorities are still doing their job, so I will not ask the Secretary of State any specific questions about the incident or the Government’s response, although I am sure the time for those questions will come soon.

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Boris Johnson: The right hon. Lady is right to place emphasis on the breaches of the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty that we are now seeing and on the risk to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, which is one of the great achievements of the post-war order. The UK is active in New York, and, with our American friends, we are making the case that it is time to bring the Russians firmly to heel. There is no doubt that there is a great deal of anxiety about what is now happening. Fundamentally, it is not in Russia’s interest.

The right hon. Lady makes an interesting point about so-called Magnitsky amendments. Members on both sides of the House are interested in tabling such amendments to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, which, as she rightly says, is now in Committee. We will look at all such proposals with an open mind. We are very interested in trying to address the issue of those who grossly abuse human rights, which is what everybody wants to achieve. As currently framed, the Bill, a fortiori, tackles such gross abuses because it tackles all those who abuse human rights. I am conscious that the House wishes to go further, and we are happy to look at that.

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): I follow the example of the shadow Foreign Secretary by saying that, as a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, I do not intend to ask the Foreign Secretary for details of the recent incident, but does he agree that, after more than a decade now, we can see the direction of travel of the Putin regime? Its ability to murder people it regards as traitors is in the finest traditions of the KGB, the NKVD, et cetera. Are the measures taken by the British Government having any effect whatsoever on Putin?

Boris Johnson: As I have told the House, we believe the sanctions that we have been instrumental in implementing have had an effect, and it is certainly the case that the Russian economy took a serious hit as a result of those sanctions—more than 100 individuals have been listed, and the sectoral measures cover energy, art, the arms trade and financial services. The sanctions are having an effect. If I may say so, it is a measure of the UK’s leading role in enforcing those sanctions and in calling Russia out that Russian rhetoric towards the UK is quite as hostile as it is.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): First of all, my thoughts go to Mr Skripal and his daughter, who we hope will recover. Does this not demonstrate the different types of threat that we face? The threats are not always obvious or traceable. This is
not a classic article 5 scenario, but this type of scenario is not unknown to our allies in the Baltic states. Does this not cut to the heart of the modernising defence programme in terms of how we protect human assets like Mr Skripal in this country? Can the Foreign Secretary tell us whether this type of scenario will lead to a review of how we best protect these people across the United Kingdom?

**Boris Johnson:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very perceptive point about the way in which such attacks affect not only the UK but many of our NATO allies. If what happened in Salisbury turns out to be as many suspect, we will co-ordinate our response with our NATO allies.

The hon. Gentleman asks how we protect such individuals, which is obviously not something on which he would expect me to comment in the House of Commons. We do our best to give such individuals the protection we can.

**Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con):** I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s statement, which highlights the very real problems that we are now encountering in our relations with Russia. He will be aware that when the Intelligence and Security Committee was reformed, we immediately announced that one of our priorities is to carry out an inquiry into Russia’s covert activities and whether we have the appropriate responses to them. He may agree that that matter perhaps now requires a greater degree of urgency. I therefore ask him to do everything possible to facilitate that inquiry and ensure that it can get under way as soon as possible.

**Boris Johnson:** From his vantage point as Chair of the ISC, my right hon. and learned Friend has been following this very closely. I undertake to get back to him on that matter as soon as possible.

**Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab):** The Foreign Secretary rightly says that no attempt on an innocent life on our soil should go uninvestigated or unpunished. I would not expect him to comment on the investigation that is currently under way—obviously we all have concerns for the welfare of the two individuals—but what about the 14 suspicious deaths that several Members have now raised?

In many of those cases, UK authorities concluded that the deaths were suicides, despite the fact that there has now been considerable reported evidence, including in the BuzzFeed report, casting serious doubt on those conclusions. There are also claims that US intelligence may have provided further evidence to the contrary in those 14 individual cases, and there are serious questions about whether the police investigations were thorough enough. As a result of what he has said, will the Foreign Secretary now discuss urgently with the Home Secretary whether a National Crime Agency investigation, or other form of police investigation, and review of all 14 cases should now take place?

**Boris Johnson:** The right hon. Lady is perfectly right to say that as my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) pointed out, there are a number of deeply troubling cases, such as that of Mr Perepilichny. To the best of our knowledge at present, there is no further evidence that points in the direction of criminality, but what she says is very important. We will certainly follow it up and I will certainly have that discussion with the Home Secretary.

**Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con):** It is almost exactly four years since the annexation of the sovereign territory of Ukraine in Crimea by Russia. It is two years since the public inquiry concluded that President Putin almost certainly approved the murder of Alexander Litvinenko. Is it not clear therefore that existing sanctions are failing to deter Russia, possibly even from carrying out further assassinations on British soil, and that the time has come to impose far tougher sanctions targeted against individuals associated with President Putin’s regime?

**Boris Johnson:** I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for that. Obviously, we cannot prejudge the outcome of this investigation, as that would not be right. As I have said repeatedly, in the formula I have used, if the suspicions of Members on both sides of the House are confirmed, such sanctions are going to have to be one of the options we look at.

**Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD):** These developments are clearly deeply concerning—not only those in Salisbury but the Heidi Blake reports about the potential of a wider pattern of multiple assassinations on UK soil by the Russian regime. I welcome the fact that the Foreign Secretary, in response to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, said he is going to look into those cases further. I want to press him on this point about assets, because other countries have taken a tougher line on the assets of Russian nationals than we do here in the UK, particularly in London, where there is a higher concentration of these assets. Will he look again at what can be done, not only on cases where we are yet to have further investigation, but on past cases where we already know many of the facts, such as that of Magnitsky?

**Boris Johnson:** I will certainly look at what the hon. Lady proposes, but I have to say that the UK leads the world in cracking down on money laundering and those—[Interruption.]—We do. We lead the world in cracking down on money laundering and we are trying to expose the beneficial ownership of accounts across the world. If it is possible to expose further such illicit activity in London, or indeed anywhere in the UK, in order to hold people to account, of course we will do this.

**James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con):** I recognise that the Foreign Secretary will be constrained in what he can say, but at a time when the focus has understandably been directed at confronting terrorism, will he reassure us that he and other Cabinet colleagues will see that the Security Service and our other intelligence agencies devote appropriate resources and attention to the activities of Russia and other foreign Governments within the UK, and the potential threats they pose?

**Boris Johnson:** My right hon. Friend speaks for many, on both sides of the House, in wanting to see our intelligence services, which are one of the great global assets of this country, properly funded, particularly now, not just in the war against terror but in the struggle against malign Russian activity.
Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I do not think the Government have been robust or consistent enough over these past few years, and I have said that for a long time. Putin's violent record is a matter for all to see—Beslan, the Moscow theatre, Crimea and Ukraine, Anna Politkovskaya and many other journalists, Sergei Magnitsky, Boris Nemtsov and so on. The truth is that this Government have repeatedly just shrugged their shoulders. After the Litvinenko inquiry found that Putin was personally responsible, the Government did absolutely nothing in response. What happens when a murdering dictator is told that nothing is going to happen? They just do it all over again. I urge the Foreign Secretary to think long and hard about a proper Magnitsky Act, which many other countries have adopted already. Let us make it absolutely clear to Russia: you cannot kill people on our soil with impunity.

Boris Johnson: I agree with the last sentiment the hon. Gentleman expressed, but I do not agree that the UK stood by and did nothing after the murder of Alexander Litvinenko. On the contrary, we have led the world in tough action against Russia: both at the United Nations and in the European Union we have been in the forefront of those calling for tough measures against Putin's Russia. I made exactly those points in Moscow when I saw Sergei Lavrov, as some hon. Members may recall. As for the hon. Gentleman's substantive point about financial services infrastructure? As we carry less cash and cheque books, we are reliant on our electronic cards.

Boris Johnson: Absolutely. It is clear from the NotPetya attack and others that Russia is certainly prepared to attack our infrastructure, and we should guard against that possibility with every preparation we can.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I may have misinterpreted the question from the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee, but it left me with the worrying impression that the Government are resisting the Committee's attempts to hold an investigation into Russian interference. I would therefore be grateful if the Foreign Secretary could reassure the House on that point. The BuzzFeed investigation was published last June, so perhaps he could tell the House what the Government did then.

Boris Johnson: I have a couple of points to make on that. No attempt is being made to resist any investigation. On the contrary, as I have told the House repeatedly, this Government have mounted the strongest possible resistance across the world to Russian aggression and interference. I think hon. Members will readily concede that plenty of other Governments trade freely with Russia, oppose sanctions and are massively dependent on Russian hydrocarbons, and it is up to the UK to stand up for decency and to resist what Russia is doing.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): As someone who has campaigned for some time on the so-called “Magnitsky campaign”, may I say that the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill offers an opportunity we are certainly willing to have the full Magnitsky, as opposed to Magnitsky-lite which we got last year in another piece of legislation? The Opposition's amendments were well intended but can be improved on. May I tell my right hon. Friend that on Report there will be an opportunity for the whole House to come together to give a clear message? I urge him, with all the measures I can, to listen to all sides, because this issue concerns people right across this House.

Boris Johnson: My right hon. Friend is right to say that this issue greatly exercises Members on both sides of the House. As I have said repeatedly, we will certainly address the issue and we will try to find a way forward that addresses Members' concerns.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The Government's response to Sir Robert Owen's findings on Alexander Litvinenko was criticised at the time for not providing a sufficient deterrent effect. Whatever the Foreign Secretary's view on whether the Government have taken action so far and no matter what findings in relation to Mr Skripal come through in time, does not this increasingly comprehensive picture show that the deterrent effect that the Government have desired is not working and that much more is needed?

Boris Johnson: I think all Members would concede that, in the case of Sergei Skripal and his daughter, we need to await the outcome of the investigation. Let us wish them every possible good fortune in their recovery. The Government are obviously going to look very carefully at whatever we can do to stop such a thing happening again. If things are as suspected by Members on both sides of the Chamber, we may have to come forward with much tougher measures, but we obviously cannot prejudge the investigation. The most important point is that the UK is in the lead around the world in standing up against Russia. It may well be that that explains the particular hostility we are currently enduring. All I will say to the House is that it is worth it for this country to carry on with what it is doing to stand up to Russia, even if it exposes us to this kind of threat and challenge.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Over the years, I have tried to understand the Russian position, and particularly the Russian attitude to the right of self-determination of the Russian majority in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, but the way to preserve peace with Russia is by having peace through strength. There is no point in giving commitments to the Baltic states without hardware and men on the ground. Will the Foreign Secretary echo the words of the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who is sitting next to him and who said in the estimates debate last week that spending 2% on defence was not enough?

Boris Johnson: I am not going to join my hon. Friend in calling for an increase in another Department’s budget right now, although it is absolutely right that we should be spending at least 2%. I should say, though, that out of that 2% we are able to fund—[Interruption.]
The shadow Foreign Secretary says that we should spend it properly; we are, for instance, spending it on the 800 UK serving men and women in Tapa in Estonia, on the frontline with Russia, who are giving reassurance to a vital NATO ally. That is what the UK is doing. Believe me, the Russians know that we are doing that and that we are in the lead in calling for France and other EU countries to step up to the plate and deploy in the Baltics. The Russians know that we are in the lead in standing up for our friends in that part of the world. Yes, it may be that we in this country are paying a price for that, but we are not going to resile from that commitment.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Following the apparent poisoning of Mr Skripal and his daughter, will the Foreign Secretary tell us whether the toxycology report will be made public, and if so, when?

Boris Johnson: I must respectfully tell the hon. Lady that, as I said right at the beginning of my response to the urgent question, I am not going to give a commentary on the investigation.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the work that Britain’s National Cyber Security Centre does to resist Russian cyber-attacks on the UK’s critical infrastructure? How does he categorise such attacks—are they just nuisances that we have to learn to live with and deal with, or are they, as some would say, acts of war?

Boris Johnson: That is a very perceptive question. I increasingly think that we have to categorise them as acts of war, which means that we need to elaborate a new doctrine of response and a new doctrine of deterrence. We certainly are doing that—it was one of the conclusions that we reached in the National Security Council a few months ago.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary speaks of the UK leading the way on EU sanctions on Russia. When we leave the EU, we will lose our seat at the table. In the six-monthly review of the sanctions, we have continued to push for their renewal. How will we exert influence when we have left the EU? What will be the legal status of the sanctions during the transition period?

Boris Johnson: I think the hon. Lady may have been in the House when we introduced the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, when I explained that although we may be leaving the EU, we are not leaving Europe, and we will be intimately involved in the development of sanctions and other foreign policy. That is the intention of not only the UK but all our European partners. Fully half of EU sanctions listings depend on UK intelligence. We are an integral part of the European sanctions environment and will continue to be so.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): We could speak softly if we carried a big stick, so was not the peace dividend at the end of the cold war utterly misconceived?

Boris Johnson: I respectfully disagree with my right hon. Friend. Friend, in the sense that, appalling though recent events have been—as I say, we do not know exactly what has taken place in Salisbury and it is as bad as it looks, it is another crime in the litany of crimes that we can lay at Russia’s door—as somebody who grew up during the cold war, I resist the comparison between events today and the misery and horror of the gulags and the suffering of the peoples of eastern Europe that I remember. I do not think we should necessarily equate the conflict and difficulties that we have with Russia today with the existential threats that we faced during the 1970s and 1980s.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary is right to say that the current situation is not the same as it was during the cold war, but is it not time to have an open and honest dialogue with the British people about how Russia uses instability, uncertainty and violence across the continent as part of its hybrid warfare, which is not peace but not war? That is the situation we are in and that conversation needs to be had. Will the Foreign Secretary lead it?

Boris Johnson: As the hon. Lady will know, the Prime Minister herself spoke in her Mansion House speech about this very matter and set out clearly her deep anxieties about how Russia is behaving. What we need to do is to concert international activity, sanction individuals who are part of Putin’s regime and keep the international community focused on exactly the points that the hon. Lady makes. Believe me, there is growing support around the world for what she says.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Having listened closely to today’s exchanges, I am sadly struggling to avoid the conclusion that Russia has now reached the point where it has little or no respect for Britain’s foreign, defence and security policy. If I am wrong, will the Foreign Secretary tell me why?

Boris Johnson: I have to disagree with my hon. Friend, because I believe that the UK is in the frontline of a struggle between two value systems. As the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) said, Russia is determined to impose its own way of thinking, particularly on the peoples of central and eastern Europe—the countries of the former Soviet Union. Russia is effectively revanchist, and it is the UK that is in the lead in standing up to it. Many other countries would prefer to turn a blind eye. Many other countries would prefer to go to the St Petersburg International Economic Forum, step up their trade in hydrocarbons and ignore what is going on. Believe me, there are many countries around the table in the European Union that would like to do that, and there are many countries around the world that believe that it is wrong and misguided to stand up to Russia.

We do not take that view; we take a principled view. We have been in the lead in the imposition of sanctions. We have been in the lead in standing up against Russian-supported aggression in Syria and in calling out Russia for what it did in the western Balkans and Montenegro. We are having a summit in this country in July on the defence of the western Balkans and all those countries against Russian encroachment. It is the UK that is resisting. As I have said to Members repeatedly, it may
very well be that Russia will behave towards us in a way that is notably aggressive, but we will not be bowed and we will not allow such action to go unpunished.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Skripal case has disturbing parallels not only with the Litvinenko case, but with the BBC drama “McMafia”, as does the report leaked to The Guardian and the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project last month, which found that millions of pounds linked to the Putin family and the FSB—Russia’s federal security service—spy network had been laundered through the London property network. Does not the Foreign Secretary appreciate how simply patting himself on the back and saying that we are leading the world looks complacent? We simply must do more to promote financial transparency.

Boris Johnson: I certainly agree that more can be done to promote financial transparency, but across the world the UK is second to none in doing that.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary share my concern about the basing of Sputnik in Edinburgh from where it spreads misinformation and peddles conspiracy theories to foment division in the UK? Does he also agree that it is incredibly disappointing that current MPs and former First Ministers give Russia Today and Sputnik a pretence of credibility that they do not deserve?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Members from all sides of the House should think long and hard before they appear on Russia Today, which is clearly a vehicle for Kremlin propaganda.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary, like many other people, has spoken powerfully about the extent to which Russia—while not at war with us—can be seen only as an enemy of the best interests of the United Kingdom. On that basis, is it not time to review whether we should continue to sit on the UN Security Council and have Russia in a position where it is able to decide whether the actions that we take with our military are lawful?

Boris Johnson: If things turn out as many Members on both sides of the House suspect they will—to return to that formula—we will have to have a serious conversation about our engagement with Russia. Thinking ahead to the World Cup this summer, it is very difficult to imagine how UK representation at that event could go ahead in the normal way, and we will certainly have to consider that.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The southern gas corridor, which is currently under construction by BP, stretches from Azerbaijan to Italy, with spurs across Europe. It will end the reliance on Russian gas, which makes it a threat to Russia’s potential finances. Will the Foreign Secretary undertake a review of the security of that pipeline to ensure that Russia cannot interfere with it, so that Europe can then get its proper gas supplies in an appropriate way?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on gas supplies and the political strategic use that Russia makes of those supplies. I will certainly look at the point that he raises about the Azerbaijan pipeline.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): International arrest warrants are still outstanding for the two people alleged to have killed Litvinenko. There is no chance of extraditing them to this country. Yesterday, whether it was poisonous gases or substances that we saw on the streets of Britain, they could have caused harm to our citizens. If the Foreign Secretary cannot bring Litvinenko’s killers to justice, how can he guarantee that those who perpetrated yesterday’s crime will equally be brought to justice?

Boris Johnson: Obviously, we must leave it to the police and the security services to do what they can to bring the perpetrators of yesterday’s crime, or attempted crime, to justice.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Here in the UK, we often say that pride comes before a fall. In Russia, it is rather different. They say that if you have no pride, you will surely fall. Will my right hon. Friend reassure the House that, in the dealings of the Foreign Office and other Departments with Russia, full account is taken of the Russian psychology, which respects only strength?

Boris Johnson: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, she makes a good point, but we must really await the outcome of the investigation before we begin to draw conclusions with our friends.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Given the various concerns expressed in this Chamber about both today’s events and the demonstration of Russian power, which we saw earlier in the week, can the Foreign Secretary reassure us that discussions on how to counter this are taking place with current EU member states and other allies?

Boris Johnson: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, she makes a good point, but we must really await the outcome of the investigation before we begin to draw conclusions with our friends.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Russia has conducted cyber-attacks against European countries, invaded the sovereign territory of Ukraine, abducted an Estonian border guard, and murdered people on British soil. Given Putin’s strategy of divide and rule, does the Foreign Secretary not agree that the UK response to Russian aggression needs to be robust, but, to be most effective, should it not also command the support not just of his party and the Government, but the whole of this Parliament?

Boris Johnson: I very much agree with both the manner and the content of what the hon. Lady has said, and I know that she speaks for the vast majority of people in both Houses of Parliament.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I urge the Foreign Secretary to think not of the 1950s and the cold war, but of the 1930s. Personally, I believe that the period we are passing through now is probably as
dangerous as the 1930s, Russia is the new Germany, with a leader who is also very unpredictable and very determined to take on America and the free world. Will the right hon. Gentleman make sure that, at a time when we have a fragmented Europe and when America has, in many respects, distanced itself from the world stadium, he takes this issue seriously, because colleagues on both sides of the House are absolutely right: the Russians will listen only to force and challenge.

Boris Johnson: The hon. Gentleman is completely right that the Russians only respect force, which is why the UK has been so absolutely insistent on the enhanced forward presence in Estonia, in supporting the Baltic countries, in resisting Russian aggression in the western Balkans, and in imposing sanctions for what Russia did in Ukraine. There are plenty of other Governments who do not believe that we should take this line—that do not believe that the international community should be taking this line. It is the UK that has been in the lead and will continue to be in the lead.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Much as I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s strong condemnation of Russia and his reassertion of state sanctions, it is clear that they not working. I am concerned that there is a lack of political will to take the matter further, perhaps because there is an awful lot of Russian money sloshing around the City of London, driving the London property market and, dare I say it, being donated on some occasions to political parties. Could we not put further pressure on Putin by targeting those members of the Russian community over here who have perhaps brought over some of those large amounts of money?

Boris Johnson: Let us await the outcome of the investigation. Let us get to the bottom of what has happened to Sergei Skripal and his daughter, and then we can consider what more we can do.

Yarl’s Wood Detention Centre

1.27 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 detention centre at Yarl’s Wood.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Ensuring that individuals abide by immigration rules is an essential part of an effective immigration system. This includes individuals leaving the UK if they have no lawful basis to remain. Of course, we all hope that those with no right to remain in the UK will leave voluntarily, and we have measures in place to assist those who wish to do so. However, this is not always the case, and detention is therefore an important tool.

The dignity and welfare of all individuals detained is of utmost importance, and any decision to detain is made on a case-by-case basis, taking into account individual circumstances. But let me be clear: Home Office officials work with any individual with no right to be in the UK, both detained—including those at Yarl’s Wood—and in the community, to assist with their return at any time, if they decide to leave the UK. In fact, 95% of people without the right to be here are managed in the community and most people detained under immigration powers spend only very short periods in detention.

In 2017, 92% of people were detained for four months or less, and nearly two thirds were detained for less than a month. As well as regular reviews of detention, individuals can apply for bail at any time. I visited Yarl’s Wood on 8 February to see that all detainees were being treated in a safe and dignified manner, and I understand that the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) is meeting the Home Secretary to discuss this issue very shortly.

The provision of 24-hour, seven-day-a-week healthcare in all immigration removal centres ensures that detainees have ready access to medical professionals and levels of primary care in line with individuals in the community. Any detainees who choose to refuse food or fluid, including the declining number of residents at Yarl’s Wood who are currently refusing food, are closely monitored by on-site healthcare professionals. Home Office staff will not only ensure that detainees are informed about how their actions may impact on their health, but make it clear that we will continue to seek to progress their case. The Government are committed to protecting the welfare and dignity of those in detention and we will always set the highest standards to ensure the safety and wellbeing of detainees.

Ms Abbott: The shadow Attorney General and I travelled to Yarl’s Wood detention centre on Friday 23 February to inspect conditions and speak to some of the people detained there. The Minister will be aware that I have been pressing for such access to the centre since the autumn of 2016. The timing of our visit coincided with a hunger strike by some of the detainees, who were protesting at what they described as the inhumane conditions there. But in response to my repeated inquiries, the authorities at the detention centre, the Home Office, Serco and G4S said categorically that there was no hunger strike. It now seems that we were misled.
Is the Minister aware that newspaper reports show a letter that has been sent to these women by the Home Office? The letter has been reproduced in some media outlets. It is a signed letter, on Home Office headed paper, which begins by stating that “the fact that you are currently refusing food and/or fluid may, in fact, lead to your case being accelerated”.

To some Opposition Members, this sounds like punitive deportations for women who have dared to go on hunger strike. Furthermore, I was contacted at the weekend by lawyers and others attempting to prevent the deportation of a young woman and her mother. This is wrong. The personnel at Yarl’s Wood are paid for from the public purse, yet Members of Parliament seem to have been misled by officials. Now we learn that the Home Office is apparently threatening these women with accelerated deportation.

The Minister has a series of questions to answer. When did she first know about the hunger strike? When did she know of the existence of the threatening letters, implying that deportation would be accelerated for those continuing on hunger strike? Did she or her officials approve these letters? How is it possible to accelerate deportations and conform to natural justice, as surely all cases are expedited in any event? Does the decision for removal supersede any health concerns that a detainee may have? Is the Minister aware that the primary demand of the hunger strike is to end the inhumanity of what, in practice, is indefinite detention? Finally, will the Government, in line with their own policy, stop detaining women who have been trafficked or sexually abused and stop misleading this House about their detention of these most vulnerable women?

Mr Speaker: Nobody would intentionally mislead the House. I am sure that the shadow Home Secretary was not suggesting that. I think that the allegation was of what the Clerk would consider to be a collective, rather than an individual, character.

Ms Abbott indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: Very good.

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Lady has raised some very important points. I will first clarify the circumstances in which a letter is given to individuals who may be refusing food or fluid while in detention. A letter will be handed to people after an extensive welfare interview, which happens with a medical professional, and is used to explain to individuals the very real risk that they are putting themselves at by refusing food and fluid. We want nobody in detention to be in that situation and it is important that we explain to them the risks involved.

The letter is, in fact, part of official Home Office guidance and was published on the gov.uk website in November last year. It was agreed after consultation with NHS England, Medical Justice, the Immigration Law Practitioners Association and a range of non-governmental organisations, because it is important that we get the correct information to detainees who are choosing to refuse food and fluid.

I was first aware that individuals at Yarl’s Wood were refusing food and fluid at about the same time that the right hon. Lady undertook her visit. Of course I regard it as very serious. Nobody wants detainees to be at any risk, but it is important that they should not regard this as a route to preventing their removal from this country.

As I said clearly in my opening statement, ensuring that individuals abide by immigration rules is an essential part of our immigration system. I wish to do nothing that encourages them to put their own health at risk by suggesting that doing so might prevent their removal from this country.

Indeed, there are some circumstances whereby people could be prioritised, such as if we anticipated that somebody needed escorts to be removed from the country, because there is always a long wait for that service. We can also talk to embassies to understand whether there is a problem with papers from someone’s home country, and get those expedited, so that the individual can be returned to their home country as swiftly as possible.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Accelerated processing would only be a threat if the judicial process was not seen to be fair and independent. Is it?

Caroline Nokes: My right hon. Friend will be aware that there is an extensive judicial process, whereby individuals seeking to stay in this country may apply to the first tier and, indeed, the upper tier tribunal at any stage in the process that they may apply for judicial review. We are determined to make the immigration system as fair as we possibly can, but also to uphold our rules.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The large-scale, routine detention of thousands of human beings in private prisons for an indeterminate period simply at the discretion of immigration officers is, frankly, a stain on our democracy and an affront to the rule of law. This most recent horrible episode in a detention facility is far from the first, as hon. Members know, and it will not be the last unless there is radical change. Why does the UK detain more than other European countries? Why can every other EU country manage with a time limit on immigration detention, but not the UK? Why do the Government continue to detain vulnerable people, including victims of torture, to the serious detriment of their health and wellbeing? It is very welcome that the shadow Home Secretary has brought this issue to the House, but will the Government have the courage to allow this House a binding vote and the chance to make it clear that it is time for radical reform of the UK immigration detention regime and that it is time for a limit?

Caroline Nokes: Immigration officials always consider individuals in detention on a case-by-case basis and put their welfare absolutely at the forefront. Some 95% of people with no right to be in this country are managed within the community. Only 5% will be within the immigration removal centres at any one time. They are only there when there is a realistic chance of removal, and we always seek to ensure that they are removed as soon as possible.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the superb job that she is doing as check Immigration Minister. My constituents in Kettering want to see firm but fair border controls, and...
the detention centre is absolutely part of that. Will the Minister assure me that the 5% of applicants who end up in a detention centre are there because there is a very real risk that they will abscond and we will not be able to deport them?

Caroline Nokes: There are several reasons why an individual might be in immigration detention. First and foremost, those for whom there is a realistic chance of removal from the UK may be there for a short period, as we seek to get them to removal as soon as possible. There are also those in immigration detention who are foreign national offenders and those who pose a risk to our society.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome the work that the shadow Home Secretary has done to pursue this issue. I share her concern about the state of Yarl’s Wood and some of the policies that underpin it. I understand that the Immigration Minister this weekend responded to calls from my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) to prevent the deportation of two of her constituents from being accelerated as a result of one of them being on hunger strike. But as well as that individual case, will the Minister address the wider issue and confirm that no individual should have their case or their deportation accelerated or prioritised simply because they have gone on hunger strike or made some kind of protest in response to the very difficult conditions that they face? I am sure that she would not want that kind of punitive action to be taken in response to protest.

Caroline Nokes: We take the issue of individuals refusing food and fluid very seriously indeed. We do not want any individual to put their own health and wellbeing at risk. It is important that we have an immigration policy that includes detention, but that we administer it in as fair a way as possible, always seeking to use detention as a last resort. The right hon. Lady referred to a specific case. I am not going to comment on individual people’s immigration status on a case-by-case basis. However, it is important that I am always prepared to listen when Members ask me to review their cases.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I thank the Minister for her statement and for the assurances that she has given the House. It is right that we have to have detention centres. Nobody likes them, but they have to exist as part of a policy that is the right policy to pursue. But will she be absolutely clear and give us all an assurance that the welfare of anybody—whatever their status may be—is always the primary concern?

Caroline Nokes: Of course the welfare of individuals at any of our immigration centres is of paramount importance. I assure my right hon. Friend that Yarl’s Wood was inspected by Her Majesty’s chief inspector of prisons between 5 and 16 June last year, and the report was published on 15 November. In addition, Yarl’s Wood was subject to a review by Stephen Shaw, who reported in 2016. He is currently looking at the recommendations that he made and the progress that the Government—and Serco, our operative there—have made in implementing them.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My constituency has already said no to a part of the UK Government’s immoral immigration policy—a short-term holding facility near Glasgow airport. One of the main reasons cited for that refusal was the UK’s indefinite detention policy. The UK is the only country in the EU that has indefinite detention. Is the Minister proud of that policy?

Caroline Nokes: There is an automatic review of detention after a month and at every recurring month. Individuals may apply for bail at any time. It is important to reflect on the fact that only 5% of the immigration offender population will be found in detention at any one time. We seek to manage them in the community wherever we possibly can. They will be held in detention only when there is a real risk of absconding or of public harm, or where we are seeking to move somebody to removal as soon as possible.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I have a huge amount of respect for the Minister, but her statement that this happens only when people are at risk of absconding is not one that I recognise from immigration casework that I do every single day. A woman in my constituency rang the police because of a threat to kill her from a violent ex-husband. She was taken to Yarl’s Wood, not to a place of safety. We detained a woman who was a victim. She has now been given indefinite leave to remain because her case was going through the process. This is not an isolated case. Does the Home Office think that it keeps vulnerable women who are at risk of rape, sexual violence or domestic abuse safe by basically deterring them from calling the police because they will be sent to a detention centre?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady will be aware that we have a very clear policy on adults at risk in immigration detention. I do not want any woman to be at risk of harm from either a current partner or a former partner. She raised a particular case. I urge her and all Members to bear in mind that if such cases occur in their constituencies, I will always want to look at them personally. We must remember, however, that we have in this country an immigration policy that seeks to implement the rules as they are set out, and it is important that we are able to uphold those rules at all times.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): In the Minister’s answer to the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), she mentioned Stephen Shaw’s second review of the detention of people in immigration centres, particularly the experience of vulnerable people, and said that he is looking at the Home Office’s implementation of his first review. Has the second review been concluded, and has she received the report on it? If not, when does she expect to receive it, and when does the Home Office expect to publish it?

Caroline Nokes: The honest answer is no, I have not yet received it, but we anticipate it very shortly indeed.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) is travelling with the Defence Committee, but as Opelo and her mother are her constituents, she has asked me to put on record her thanks to the Minister
for her intervention at the weekend. She also asked me to put on record her thanks to the Rev. Ashley Cooper and all those at Swan Bank church for the welfare support they have been giving to the immediate friends and family. Does the Minister agree that the fact that Members of Parliament have to resort to weekend telephone calls directly to Ministers to try to stop individuals from being deported before they have had their due process is a sign that the immigration system in this country is simply failing?

**Caroline Nokes:** I said very clearly that I was not going to comment on individual cases, but we do follow due process very closely indeed. I put on record my thanks to the hon. Gentleman’s colleague, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), to whom I spoke over the weekend and with whom I am in regular contact. It is quite right that she should be able to make those representations to me at, quite frankly, whatever time of day.

**Mr David Lammy** (Tottenham) (Lab): I am very proud to be the son of immigrants and proud of this country’s record on supporting refugees and immigrants. Does the Minister understand that at the heart of her answer is an indifference, first, to indefinite detention and, secondly, to the fact that many women at Yarl’s Wood have been there for months and months, running into years? That is why many of them are refusing food. The possibility that the Government will accelerate deportation on that basis must be contrary to human rights. Can she satisfy the House that this satisfies all the obligations that the Government have to meet in their human rights record and that it is not cruel and unusual punishment?

**Caroline Nokes:** It is important to reflect on the fact that detention plays an important part in our immigration system and will continue to do so. Of course we put the welfare and wellbeing of individuals who are in detention at Yarl’s Wood, and at every other centre in this country, at the forefront of our policies. It is important to remember, however, that some people in detention, including foreign national offenders, are there because if they were in the community they would have very high potential to do harm.

**Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): A constituent of mine was detained in Yarl’s Wood last summer. She was at risk of losing her eyesight due to a serious eye condition that had already left her blind in one eye and, if left untreated for a short time, risked her going blind in the other. Despite people being made aware of this information, she was left for some time before being seen by a nurse. In the end, my office had to intervene directly to ensure that urgent medical assistance was provided to my constituent, to avoid her losing her sight. This appalling case is one of many. Will the Minister make an assessment and overall review of the conditions that women in Yarl’s Wood are subject to?

**Caroline Nokes:** Upon detention, individuals at Yarl’s Wood are given access to a healthcare professional within two hours and then have the ability to make an appointment with a general practitioner within 24 hours. It is really important that we provide healthcare to all those in detention. That is why it is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and referral onwards to external healthcare services is also available. The hon. Lady asked whether I would review welfare at Yarl’s Wood. In fact, that is the job of the independent monitoring board, the independent inspector, and of course Stephen Shaw, whom we have asked to go back to review the recommendations that he made two years ago and provide us with an update on progress.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): How can the Minister say that the justification for detention is severe risk of harm or women absconding when so many of them are very quickly, or ultimately, released back into the community and sometimes go round the loop of “detention and release, detention and release” on a number of occasions?

**Caroline Nokes:** In upholding our immigration rules, we seek to assist those who have no right to be here to return home, whether on a voluntary basis or indeed, on occasion, by force. It is really important that we have an immigration system that is robust. We do not have indefinite detention. The hon. Lady will have heard me say that 92% of those held are released within four months and 63% are released within a month. It is important that we have a system where we can be confident that when we are able move people to removal, we have the capacity to do so.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I want to put on record my support for the work that the shadow Home Secretary has been doing on this issue and for the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), who has fought tirelessly for her constituents. I am grateful that the Minister has listened and agreed to review the case. For many of us, the trouble with this is that we are talking about an environment where we know that two thirds of the women in Yarl’s Wood have experienced rape or sexual torture and that 85% of them are then released back, not deported. Does the Minister recognise that, rather than continuing to keep Yarl’s Wood open, there may be not only cheaper but much more compassionate and humane ways in which we can manage our immigration system that would speak to the best of British values?

**Caroline Nokes:** The hon. Lady will have heard me say that 95% of immigration offenders are in the community and only a very small proportion—5%—are in detention. However, detention does play an important part. We will keep people in detention where there is a realistic prospect of removal and where they might cause harm out in the community. It is important that we retain that facility.

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): At Yarl’s Wood and many institutions like it, vulnerable people are being held for long periods, despite the fact that the majority of them have committed no crime. Does the Minister agree that there must be an urgent review of the UK’s detention system?

**Caroline Nokes:** I think that I have been very clear this afternoon that, although we regard detention as a last resort, it is an important part of our suite of immigration policies. We use detention to enable us to
remove people from this country, to make sure that those who might cause harm in our communities are kept away from society and on occasions when we are seeking to remove foreign national offenders as quickly as we can.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): How many people in Yarl’s Wood are currently on suicide watch?

Caroline Nokes: We keep the welfare of detainees under very close supervision, and I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that a declining number of people are choosing to refuse food and fluid. Of course, where people have mental health issues or there are concerns about their health, it is absolutely right that we keep them under very close supervision.

Water Supply Disruption

Mr Speaker: We now turn to the statement—what might be described as “Coffey on water”—from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Dr Thérèse Coffey.

1.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I promise my response will not be diluted.

I would like to take this opportunity to update the House on the water supply situation following the severe weather experienced last week. The exceptionally cold spell and the rapid thaw that followed has caused widespread water supply issues in the country. Over the weekend, and at the start of this week, tens of thousands of people across southern England have experienced loss of water supply in their homes, and even more have had to cope with low water pressure following leaks from burst pipes. I entirely recognise that it has been a stressful and difficult time for many residents and businesses.

The immediate priority is to get water back up and running for those who have been affected, particularly vulnerable people, businesses, hospitals and care homes. Water companies have been following standard practice, including isolating bursts and redirecting water to mitigate the problem. Bottled water has been provided in the areas most badly affected, and water has been provided by tanker to keep hospitals open.

This morning I chaired a meeting with water company chief executives, Ofwat and Water UK to make sure that water companies in England are working to restore supplies as quickly as possible and that water companies in other parts of the country are preparing for the thaw as it spreads across the country. That will include learning any lessons from places that have already experienced thawing through higher temperatures. The challenge the sector faces is the sheer number of bursts following the rapid change in weather across multiple companies’ networks. Many of them have been relatively small and difficult to detect, and some of the loss of pressure is due to leaks in private homes and businesses.

As of 10.30 am today, based on the information provided by the chief executives on the phone call, we are aware of 5,000 properties still affected in Streatham. The principal source of the problem is airlocks in the water network, which Thames Water is acting to remove, and we expect that to be completed today. Southern Water reconnected supply to more than 10,000 properties overnight, and 867 properties in Hastings are still experiencing problems. We expect everyone there to be reconnected by this afternoon. South East Water has identified approximately 2,000 properties spread across Kent and Sussex that are still without supply, and we expect that they will be reconnected today. South West Water has approximately 1,500 properties affected, but that is changing on a rolling basis as the thaw progresses west. Yorkshire Water has identified 13 affected properties.

Some water companies have identified higher demand than usual on service reservoirs, which indicates that there are burst pipes that need to be dealt with. I want to encourage householders and businesses to report leaks and burst pipes, including those on their property, not just those on public highways.
Water companies have been working hard to address the issues for customers, though I recognise the frustration that many have had in contacting their water companies. I have been assured that companies have increased their staff on the ground who are out identifying where bursts have occurred and repairing them, as well as moving water across their networks to balance supply across the areas they serve. We should recognise the efforts of the hard-working engineers and all involved in working through the night to fix these problems.

Once the situation is restored to normal, we expect Ofwat to formally review the performance of the companies during this period. That will be a thorough review. As well as problems being identified, I want to see excellent examples of practice and preparation shared across the sector. The Government will consider any recommendations from the review and act decisively to address any shortcomings exposed. As part of that review, Ofwat will decide whether statutory compensation should be paid. Of course, water companies will want to consider how they compensate customers on a discretionary basis, and I discussed that with the chief executives this morning.

This Government actively support a properly regulated water sector. We have high expectations of water companies increasing their investment in their water and sewerage networks. That was laid out clearly in the strategic policy statement issued to Ofwat last September and reinforced by my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary when he addressed the water industry last week and said that he expects the industry to increase investment and improve services by maintaining a resilient network, fixing leaks promptly where they occur and preparing for severe weather.

As my right hon. Friend has said, we want a water industry that works for everyone, is fit for the future, improves performance and makes sure that bill payers are getting the best possible value for money. Ofwat will be given any powers it needs, and we will back it in action that it needs to take to ensure that water companies up their game.

1.55 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for that statement.

While last week’s freezing temperatures presented serious challenges all over the country, the failure of water companies to supply water to customers as the weather has improved has now descended into chaos. The aftermath of the “beast from the east” and Storm Emma meant that yesterday, 5,000 homes were without water in Kent, with thousands of properties across Wales, parts of the midlands and Scotland also affected by intermittent water supply.

In London, Thames Water battled to re-establish supply to around 12,000 homes and several schools. Two of the country’s flagship businesses, Jaguar Land Rover and Cadbury, were among several forced to cease production at the request of Severn Trent Water, as it sought to prioritise household supplies. Even today, as we heard from the Minister, South East Water says that around 12,000 of its customers still have no supply, and companies continue to struggle to reconnect homes and businesses across London, Kent, Sussex and Wales, leaving some homes without water for up to three days.

While we all accept that last week’s weather conditions were incredibly challenging, the reality in London is that although freezing temperatures persisted over several days, temperatures did fluctuate and only fell as low as minus 6°C on one occasion overnight. Where is the resilience in the system, and why have we seen such systemic failure?

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs made a speech just last week outlining that in many areas, water companies were failing to deliver. Six companies missed their leakage targets for 2016-17, with Thames Water’s performance data showing that 677 million litres are being lost to leakages every single day. To put that in context, the entire city of Cape Town uses 631 million litres a day.

Despite those failings on leakage, water bills have increased by more than 40% since privatisation, with many consumers set to see another rise in a few weeks’ time. Further to that, analysis by the House of Commons Library shows that executives at the top nine water and sewerage companies operating in England earned a combined total of nearly £23 million in 2017. The highest paid executive, the CEO of Severn Trent—the same water company that yesterday asked Cadbury and Jaguar Land Rover to cease production—took home a total of £2.45 million last year, or 16 times the Prime Minister’s salary. That is on top of the billions paid to shareholders—the owners of those same nine water companies paid out £18.1 billion in dividends in the 10 years to 2016. In addition, six water companies have offshore finance structures registered in the Cayman Islands.

We have had tough words from both the Secretary of State and Ofwat, but where is the governance, and where is the action? In his recent speech, the Secretary of State said:

“Some companies have been playing the system for the benefit of wealthy managers and owners”

and stressed that he would give Ofwat “whatever powers are necessary” to get all the water companies to “up their game”. Rachel Fletcher, Ofwat’s chief executive, has been tough on water companies in the past 72 hours, saying that

“we won’t hesitate to intervene if we find that companies have not had the right structures and mechanisms in place to be resilient enough.”

However, just last month, Fletcher confirmed to the BBC that a dividend cap was not in Ofwat’s current thinking, nor was direct action on executive pay or tax structures. Instead, she said, Ofwat would require water companies to provide more public information on each of the areas of concern. If the Secretary of State’s plan is to empower Ofwat to intervene, I am afraid that based on what we have seen, there is no appetite in Ofwat to do so.

That regulatory failure on this Government’s watch has contributed to a situation where executive pay is out of control, and the failure to invest in resilience has left households and businesses picking up the cost. With that in mind, I would be grateful if the Minister could answer this question: if Ofwat lacks either the appetite or the powers to tackle—pay and rebalance profits so that less is pocketed by executives and more is invested in improving the service and resilience, what action will the Government take to make that happen? Will the Government respond to calls for a public inquiry into
the handling of the crisis, and can the Minister outline whether that will involve the role of Ofwat leading up to where we are today?

Finally, can the Minister outline what compensation packages will be made available to customers, some of whom have had to seek temporary alternative accommodation or pay for childcare because schools have been closed? How will businesses that have lost a day’s trade be both compensated and reassured that this will not happen again?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady asked a number of questions, mostly about company structures, but she will understand that we have been focused on customer experiences in the past 48 hours in particular. That said, my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary read the riot act to the water industry last week.

We recognise that over £140 billion has been invested in infrastructure since privatisation, but we still believe that more needs to be done. The hon. Lady will also recognise that, on average, water bills have fallen in real terms in the past five years—over the price review period. It is important that we get an appropriate balance between investment, recognising that people expect to be able to turn on the tap and get water—I fully accept that many households in London are still not receiving water—and customer bills. It is important to have a regulated water industry to achieve such a balance.

I think Jonson Cox has been an active chairman of Ofwat in challenging the water companies. In particular, he has taken on Thames Water about its financing arrangements. Again, the Department and Ministers have made it clear to the water companies that we expect them to accelerate the changes to their financial structures. I recognise that those structures were put in place some time ago, but we have said that we expect them to change more rapidly than some of their current plans suggest.

Overall, we need to recognise that the review—I have asked Ofwat to report back to me by the end of the month—may be only an interim one, with the initial lessons about what has happened. In the short term, however, I am conscious that we must continue to put pressure on Thames Water in particular to make sure that it reconnects households as quickly as possible.

Dr Coffey: We have a well-established pattern of water provision in England. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that I am not responsible for Scotland, I do not know how much has been invested in the Scottish water industry in a comparable timeframe, but I would point to the fact that the £140 billion figure is considerably higher than the amount invested prior to privatisation. There is no doubt that there have been a lot of benefits not only in service to customers, but—dare I say it?—to the environment. We will not allow that progress to stall.

On other matters, I stress that I do not pretend to be an expert in the environment. We will not allow that progress to stall. On other matters, I stress that I do not pretend to be an expert in the environment. We will not allow that progress to stall. On other matters, I stress that I do not pretend to be an expert in the environment. We will not allow that progress to stall.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddsbury) (Con): The Environment Secretary highlighted to the industry last week that, on a normal day, 3 billion litres of water is lost to leaks. What can be done to ensure better regulation, particularly in tackling such a huge yearly water loss?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right to talk about leaks; the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) did so, too. We know that, as has been pointed out, companies are missing their leakage target. That is why we have tasked the companies to come up with plans for how they will put more investment into their infrastructure, including the sewerage network.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I thank the Minister for her statement. First, I pay tribute to all those who have worked on behalf of local authorities and other services over the past week—and even more so now—to deal with the unprecedented weather difficulties in Scotland and much of England. In Scotland, we had a red alert for snow for the first time since the current alert system was devised.

While there are still water supply difficulties in Scotland, there does not seem to have been the degree of systemic failure that we have seen in many authorities in England and Wales. Right here in London—one of the world’s greatest cities; many would argue that it is the world’s greatest city—in the 21st century, it is beyond the wit of the Government and the water authorities to provide one of the most basic essentials of human existence to tens of thousands of citizens.

I hope that the Minister will respond positively to demands for a public inquiry to find out what went wrong. It might also find out what lessons can be learned from the water service in Scotland, which has faced the same weather difficulties. There have been supply interruptions, but nothing on the scale or to the extent of what we have seen elsewhere.

When I checked the Scottish Water site immediately before the Minister stood up, the areas still affected were parts of EH10 in Edinburgh, as well as Dalwhinnie, South Ronaldsay, Burrray and Lysther. If Members check those places on a map, they will see that all four of them have very substantial remoteness issues, so we would expect it to take longer to fix any problems there.

As the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) pointed out from the Opposition Front Bench, there are problems in England with poor customer service in an industry that has paid out £18 billion to shareholders and pays out between £2.5 million and £3 million to each of some chief executives. Customers in parts of England are paying £150 a year more for their water than those in Scotland, and the service is not being provided to them.

The reason for that may be that the service in England is profit-driven and shareholder-driven, whereas in Scotland—thanks to the foresight of successive Governments of all parties in the Scottish Parliament—we have retained a Scottish water supply under public ownership and public control.

Will the Minister undertake, in the public inquiry that she must surely now accept, that nothing will be off the table, and that part of the remit will be to examine whether the ownership model that applies in Scotland would be beneficial to customers in the rest of the United Kingdom?

Dr Coffey: When I checked the Scottish Water site immediately before the Minister stood up, the areas still affected were parts of EH10 in Edinburgh, as well as Dalwhinnie, South Ronaldsay, Burrray and Lysther. If Members check those places on a map, they will see that all four of them have very substantial remoteness issues, so we would expect it to take longer to fix any problems there.

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Dr Coffey: We have a well-established pattern of water provision in England. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that I am not responsible for Scotland, I do not know how much has been invested in the Scottish water industry in a comparable timeframe, but I would point to the fact that the £140 billion figure is considerably higher than the amount invested prior to privatisation. There is no doubt that there have been a lot of benefits not only in service to customers, but—dare I say it?—to the environment. We will not allow that progress to stall.

On other matters, I stress that I do not pretend to be an expert in the environment. We will not allow that progress to stall. On other matters, I stress that I do not pretend to be an expert in the environment. We will not allow that progress to stall.

I understand that Mr Jonson Cox, the chairman of Ofwat, is a constituent of yours, Mr Speaker. You will know, I am sure, that he is a fine fellow, and he will not be taking any rubbish. I am sure he has taken some lessons from you.
Mr Speaker: That is very gracious of the Minister. Jonson Cox is in fact an estimable fellow. I have met him on many occasions, including at the Great Brickhill cricket club. I hope he recalls that, because I certainly do.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): We have too much water in the lower Avon. When is the Minister coming to have a look?

Dr Coffey: As I said to my right hon. Friend at the last Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions, I am sure I will find time to visit his wonderful constituency in due course, but he will recognise that my priorities at the moment are the people who do not have enough water.

Mr Speaker: Speaking of which, I call Helen Hayes.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): In my constituency, we have had a Thames Water leak or burst every single week of the winter. The pipe network is crumbling and causes constant problems, but it is not a surprise. The unforgivable thing about this week’s water supply problems has been the total lack of a robust emergency plan for a situation that anyone could have predicted would occur sooner or later.

Thames Water customers, faced with no water supply, have been unable to contact the company by phone or via the website, and have not had access to up-to-date detailed information, while the distribution of emergency supplies has been delayed, patchy and chaotic. There has been no plan for getting water to customers not already registered as vulnerable, but who are nevertheless unable to carry bottles of water long distances.

Thames Water made pre-tax profits of £638 million last year. There is simply no excuse for not having robust emergency plans in place. The failings this week have been appalling, and they have exposed an organisation that is not fit for purpose. Will the Minister now commit to ensuring automatic compensation for all Thames Water customers who have been without water this week, and to reforming our water industry to ensure its resilience for future emergencies?

Dr Coffey: I fully understand why the hon. Lady is so angry on behalf of her constituents. It is right that Thames Water is very much under the spotlight, and I am angry with it, too. This is a recurring pattern, but we should recognise that there has been a change of ownership and a change of leadership. I am absolutely determined that Thames Water customers should receive a far better service than they are now receiving.

It is not in my power to compel the water companies to give compensation. However, I can tell the hon. Lady that Thames Water is proactively going around to her constituents door to door in the 5,000 properties affected. It has been working through the problems with the airlocks. [Interruption.] I am just flagging up to the hon. Lady the information that I have received. I know that there was a particular problem with one of its service reservoirs, which it has now fixed, but that has caused further problems along the way.

I will of course make sure that we keep pressing Thames Water because, frankly, it has not delivered what it should be doing. I expect a full review from Ofwat that will particularly focus on its performance.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that record amounts are being invested in our water supply system? It is far more than was ever envisaged when the industry was privatised. Our water supply is actually among the best and cleanest in the world. Having said that, in this case—given that the weather was well predicted—the water supply companies have been caught on the hop, and automatic compensation ought to be paid. Does she agree that Ofwat, the water industry regulator, really needs to set a new leakage target? If, on a normal day, we are losing a fifth of the water in the system, most of my constituents in Kettering would say that that is far too much.

Dr Coffey: It is important that we also recognise those companies and parts of the country that have had no interruption of supply to customers. I thank companies such as Anglian Water, Essex and Suffolk, Wessex—I could go on. Yorkshire Water, for example, has seen an increase in demand and is proactively trying to identify where the leaks are before they become a problem for its customers. I want to zone in on the companies that are failing to help their customers and, meanwhile, I want to learn from the companies that are doing their best to protect customers.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Water engineers and others providing emergency support to customers around the country deserve our thanks and praise today, but there is no excuse for water companies that make huge profits being unable to provide the resilience that would have protected businesses and residents. While I am grateful for the Minister’s announcement of an Ofwat review, we do not need that to tell us that the water companies are held to half the standard on resilience and capacity that the Environment Agency is. Will she act and ensure that the water companies have to meet the once-in-100-years event criterion that the Environment Agency is held to?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman is confusing two levels of protection standards. I am more than happy to write to him with the full details but, in essence, when we did the national resilience review of critical national infrastructure, water companies were expected to be held to a higher standard. I think that he is referring to other parts of the water infrastructure network that do not have the same comparison to the Environment Agency.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): I have come here straight from Henry Cavendish Primary School in St Leonard’s ward in Streatham, which you used to represent, Mr Speaker. It is closed today because of the water issues. Not only has that caused huge practical inconvenience to the school, but parents have not been able to find childcare in such a short timeframe, and are losing at least a day’s wages—the school was also shut yesterday.

Under the water industry guaranteed standards scheme, most of my constituents will get compensation of only £20 if they have been without water for 48 hours. They will get a further £10 per 24 hours after that point. Frankly, that is an insult. Does the Minister agree that proper compensation should be given to my constituents, and that £20 is derisory?
Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that those are the minimum requirements, and I made that clear in my phone call to the chief executive today. The areas where people have been particularly affected include the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, and I believe that the issue is now isolated to SW16 and SW17. I expect Thames Water to go far beyond that figure to make sure that it redresses the balance.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The town of Blaenau Ffestiniog lost its water supply on Friday, and many people had to cope for three days or more without mains water, with some of them boiling snow. Will the Minister join me in commending the community of Ffestiniog, which has helped out neighbours and family, and the water company workforce who have worked day and night in horrendous conditions to restore supplies? Will she also join me in commending Dwâr Cymru’s not-for-profit business model, which directs all profits to supporting the vulnerable and a rolling investment in infrastructure?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady will recognise that I do not regulate the water companies in Wales, but I pay tribute to the community coming together to look after each other. That is something that we have seen across the country—people helping their neighbours. It is worth pointing out that each company has a vulnerable user register. At the moment, people are required to register for that, but there are other ways in which people can be proactively highlighted as potentially needing support. Thanks to the Digital Economy Act 2017, we have data sharing provisions and, when the secondary legislation comes forward in the near future, water companies will have the capacity to proactively identify vulnerable people so that they do not need to ask for help, but get that automatically.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The dreadful and unacceptable situation faced by thousands of water consumers needs urgent action and certainly would not be addressed by blunt tools such as nationalisation. Rather it begs questions about whether Ofwat has the powers and duties required to regulate the industry effectively and in the public interest. Will the Minister therefore commit the Government to the reform of Ofwat to ensure that it is fit for purpose?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady will recognise the proactivity of her water company as it affects her constituents. By and large, Ofwat is doing a good job. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has asked Jonson Cox and Rachel Fletcher, who is the new chief executive, what powers they need to further improve the performance of water companies and to help consumers and businesses. We are prepared to give them those powers and back the actions they take to make sure that the water industry is fit for purpose.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): The reality for many thousands of people, including hundreds in my constituency in Arnold, Nottingham, was 24 hours without water and, in some circumstances, no access to bottled water. In particular, people had concerns about vulnerable customers. Can the Minister assure us that companies such as Severn Trent will now review their emergency plans so that such things cannot happen again? It is simply unacceptable that we cannot even get bottled water to everyone who needs it.

Dr Coffey: I would be happy to hear a bit more detail from the hon. Gentleman on his local situation. I know that Severn Trent has been working through the night over the past few days to fix the issues. Part of the review will look into that, and I have already outlined how we want to do more to help our vulnerable customers.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Over the past four days, thousands of Balham and Tooting residents have been without water. The response from the local community in coming together has been superb, and I have been communicating with more than 1,000 residents each night on Twitter. Not every resident is on social media such as Twitter or Facebook, however, so does the Minister agree that a drastic rethink is needed of how Thames Water communicates in a time of crisis?

Dr Coffey: Social media can be a useful way to communicate, but I recognise that it is not the only way. Part of Ofwat’s review will look at communications, and that might be a role for Ofwat or other media sources, such as broadcast. We recently introduced the 105 number for electricity disruptions, and I have asked officials and Water UK whether we could perhaps do the same for water disruptions so that reporting leaks or getting help are less complicated. We need to make sure that help comes more quickly than perhaps the hon. Lady’s residents have experienced in the last few days.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The N8 and N4 areas have also been badly affected. Not a week goes by without a large flood and now we do not have enough water. Will the Minister please make representations to Thames Water? The regulator is toothless: £20 compensation will not cut it for most of my constituents, many of whom have had to miss work, incur extra childcare costs and so on.

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady describes difficult issues that are affecting her constituents as well as other parts of the country. That is why I have made the point to the water companies that they have the opportunity to offer discretionary compensation. I would welcome their doing that, especially in areas where the issue has been prolonged, in recognition of the frustrations in daily life that are caused by the lack of this basic service.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Lest anyone think these major bursts and leaks are solely the product of the recent snow and ice, let me say that in the last week of January, two major mains burst in Hammersmith, flooding residential and business premises, cutting off thousands of people in west London and closing two major east-west routes—King Street and Goldhawk Road. The latter is still closed almost six weeks later. The problem is that private monopoly utilities such as Thames have neither the carrot nor the stick so that they undertake the necessary repair and replacement of their pipework. My constituents want the Government to force them to do that, but I have heard nothing about it. Is not the Minister just washing her hands?

Dr Coffey: I recognise the description of the issue on Goldhawk Road. It is perhaps worth explaining that the problems being experienced at the moment are quite different from a mains burst. This is what is happening when pipes are dotted all around, whether in people’s...
properties or on the highway, so it is a different experience from the picture that the hon. Gentleman paints on behalf of his constituents in Goldhawk Road. Investment has been increasing, but the Government are not satisfied. That is why Ofwat has set a stringent price review, and we look forward to making sure that the plans on which water companies will shortly consult will lead to a significant increase in investment to tackle some of the challenges that have been outlined today.

2.19 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the Foreign Secretary’s response to an urgent question a few minutes ago, he said: “Thinking ahead to the World cup this summer, it is very difficult to imagine how UK representation at that event could go ahead in the normal way”. If the Foreign Secretary is saying that England should pull out of the World cup, the consequences would be absolutely massive for the travel industry and other businesses, as well as the media and the tens of thousands of supporters who intend to travel. Have you heard, Mr Speaker, whether there will be a statement to that effect? If not, we should ask the Foreign Secretary to come back very quickly to explain such an important claim.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his attempted point of order—a description I use advisedly. I understand the very strong concern he feels about this matter, not least in view of his passion for sport which, as he knows, he shares with me and with a great many right hon. and hon. Members across the House. To be fair to the Foreign Secretary, whom the hon. Gentleman briefly quoted, he used the conditional tense. I think it would be correct to say that he was ruminating on the possibilities in the event of no improvement in the situation. I do not think it would be right to say that he made a statement of policy. It is, however, a matter of concern and one which, knowing the insistence of the hon. Gentleman in the pursuit of his quarry, I think he will be minded again to raise in the days ahead.

Toby Perkins: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. To be fair, the Foreign Secretary qualified his comments by saying: “If things turn out to be as many Members…suspect they will”. He did not say, “If there is no improvement in relations,” so he was very specific. He is saying that if things are as we suspect they are, he will call into question whether we should appear at the World cup. That is a fairly substantial policy declaration, so I wonder whether we should ask him to make a statement to the House to that effect.

Mr Speaker: The whole point about this situation is that there is an urgency and a topicality associated with it. The reason why I granted the urgent question to the Foreign Secretary was precisely that I thought the matter warranted the urgent attention of the House today. There had been no offer of a Government statement, but I decided that a Minister should come to respond to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). There is a police investigation into a particular set of circumstances, which will cause grave disquiet to colleagues—the incident, rather than the police investigation—and the matter is ongoing. If, in the days ahead, the hon. Gentleman wishes to assume his place in the Chamber, there will be an opportunity for him to put questions.
If the situation were to prove as bad as some fear, I have no doubt that a Minister would volunteer a statement. If, however, such a statement is not volunteered when it is warranted, the use of the urgent question is now very commonplace. On my recollection, since I took the Chair of this House, we have had 441 urgent questions over the past eight and a half years. The hon. Gentleman should not despair. He need not fear that his legitimate concerns will not have a chance to be aired in this Chamber, for they will have such a chance. I hope that that will satisfy the hon. Gentleman, at least for now.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I rise to draw attention to the fact that at the end of last week the US Administration gave notice of potential punitive tariffs—about 25% on steel and 10% on aluminium. Since then, they have suggested that there will be further punitive action against car imports. I am surprised, Mr Speaker, that we have not already had a statement from a Minister about trade policy and the trade action that the UK Government are taking. I seek your guidance on whether you have been given notice that one will be forthcoming.

Mr Speaker: I have been given no indication that a statement on the matter is forthcoming. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is with us in the Chamber, and he will have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said. I think it is fair to say—I make this point for the benefit of those who were not present yesterday during the Prime Minister’s statement but who are listening to our proceedings—that the matter was touched upon in the course of the questioning of the Prime Minister. However, that is very different from a full-blooded treatment of what is a very important discrete issue in and of itself. If the issue remains urgent in the mind of the hon. Gentleman and is objectively urgent, it may well have an opportunity to be aired in the course of this week.

BILLS PRESENTED

HOSPITAL PATIENTS (TRANSPORT)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Tim Farron, supported by Tom Brake, Layla Moran, Stephen Lloyd, Norman Lamb, Grahame Morris and Gillian Keegan, presented a Bill to make provision about transport services for patients travelling to and from hospital appointments, including requiring the Government to review the current provision of public and private transport services for such purposes; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 July 2018, and to be printed (Bill 173).

VOYEURISM (OFFENCES)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Wera Hobhouse, supported by Sir Vince Cable, Jo Swinson, Christine Jardine, Layla Moran, Caroline Lucas, Anna Soubry, Jeremy Lefroy, Catherine West, Grahame Morris, Tonia Antoniazzi and Ben Lake, presented a Bill to make certain acts of voyeurism an offence.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 May 2018, and to be printed (Bill 174).

Wild Animals in Circuses

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

2.26 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision to prohibit the use of wild animals in travelling circuses.

In recent years, Members of Parliament have worked hard to prohibit the use of wild animals in circuses and I want to pay tribute to their efforts. I thank the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), my hon. Friends the Members for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) and for Colchester (Will Quince), and, most recently, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). I am also grateful to colleagues from right across the House for their support for the Bill.

As a child I remember my Grandad’s often repeated account of the travelling circus that visited our small village of Bootle in 1936. As a 14-year-old young farmer, it was his job to ensure that the performing animals had feed, water and bedding. The highlight of the tale was the mad elephant that escaped and ran riot up Bootle Main Street. As Members can imagine, in a small village this story, told by many across the generations, captured the imagination, but it also highlights how times have changed. What was acceptable in 1936 is no longer the case. Thanks to the likes of David Attenborough and documentaries about African elephants, I now think about how unhappy and frightened that magnificent creature must have been, and not about the excitement of a circus rolling into a small village.

More recently, in 2009, while visiting a Spanish town, my family and I saw big cats and monkeys contained in small beast wagons in a large car park occupied by a travelling circus. That experience instilled in me a desire to put an end to the use of wild animals in travelling circuses. My opinion is shared by the vast majority of the British public, and by my daughters who witnessed the animals’ cramped conditions. Thankfully, that region of Spain, Murcia, has now banned wild animals in circuses, as have many countries in Europe, including Austria, Belgium, Cyprus and Greece. More recently, Italy, Ireland and Scotland have followed.

In the UK, going to the circus to see wild animals being used for the public’s entertainment is no longer viewed as morally or ethically acceptable in our modern society. In 2009, the then Labour Government launched a consultation which revealed that a ban on wild animals in circuses was supported by 94.5% of those who responded to the consultation, and I am pleased that Members from right across the House are supportive of a ban. In years gone by, animal performances, when the travelling circus came to town, were hugely popular. They provided perhaps the only opportunity to see incredible creatures, such as elephants, big cats and bears, in close proximity. Today, though, we know better, and we can recognise that the needs of wild animals are not best served by a life in the circus. In fact, the use of wild animals in travelling circuses is not necessary for people to experience the joys of a circus performance. Animal-free circuses have all the thrills and excitement that people would hope to find inside the mystical big-top tent, but without a single wild-animal performance.
The success of Cirque du Soleil in London, Las Vegas and around the world—nearly 150 million people have paid to be amazed by acrobats and daring high-wire stunts without wild animals being involved—demonstrates the change in public opinion. Furthermore, wild animals are not naturally suited to the travelling circus life and may suffer as a result of not being able to fulfil their instinctive natural behaviour. In modern Britain, is it right that we allow wild animals to travel around the country from temporary enclosures to circus tent and back to a lorry for a journey on to the next town? What sort of a life is that for animals such as zebras and camels? Without space to forage and interact with animals of their own kind in the way that they would naturally, these wild animals cannot truly be said to be wild.

I do not doubt that the vast majority of circus keepers licensed by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs care for their animals and rightly adhere to strict animal welfare standards. However, if wild animals are to be kept in captivity, they require the environment, care, facilities and cohabitation to exhibit their natural behaviour as they would in the wild, which is simply not possible on the road with a circus. This stance is supported by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the British Veterinary Association and many other animal health and welfare organisations that I have spoken to. As recently as 2011, with the case of Anne the Asian elephant, who was badly mistreated at her circus winter quarters, we have seen that homes for retired circus animals can be found. Longleat safari park took on the care of Anne and she is now living out her days there without having to perform or travel the length and breadth of the country.

Eighteen wild animals are currently owned by the two remaining circuses who use wild animals in their performances. This includes zebras, camels, reindeer and raccoons, but the species and number of animals used by circuses change routinely. That highlights the problem with the reliance on the current regulations: if licensing conditions are met, there is nothing to stop more animals and different types of animals returning to the circus.

The House of Commons Library reported that in 2014, one circus in the UK borrowed three elephants from Germany to use in performances here. Without an explicit ban brought into law, there is nothing to stop elephants, lions and tigers coming back to the circuses in our local towns. Although people may have their own opinions about the ethics and morality of keeping animals in zoos and wildlife safari parks here in the UK, they contribute to educational research, breeding programmes and conservation efforts around the world. Most UK zoos have special links to national parks in Africa and South America to increase awareness of species protection and to sponsor anti-poaching efforts. Circuses that use wild animals in their performances add nothing to the understanding and conservation of wild animals and their natural environment.

Wild animals deserve our respect and should not to be in circuses, trained solely for the entertainment of crowds to perform tricks and acts that have no correlation to their natural behaviour. The British public overwhelmingly support a ban on the use of wild animals in travelling circuses, and bringing the law up to date is long overdue. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Trudy Harrison, Sir Roger Gale, Will Quince, Sue Hayman, Mark Pritchard, Dr Matthew Offord, Jim Shannon, Sir David Amess, Theresa Villiers, Zac Goldsmith, Kerry McCarthy and Neil Parish present the Bill.

Trudy Harrison accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March, and to be printed (Bill 175).
Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill

2.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Virtually every household in the country depends on gas or electricity, or both. They are essential services on which we rely. On average, each household spends around £1,250 a year on energy at home—it is one of our biggest household bills—and for the poorest 10% of households, energy is 10% of their annual household expenditure.

Since the early 1980s, when the industry was privatised, consumers have benefited from a more reliable service. Power cuts are at half the level that they were before privatisation and prices have been among the lowest in Europe. Last year, household electricity prices were 13% below the EU average. In recent years, more than 60 new energy suppliers have entered the market, selling direct to consumers. One in five consumers are now with small and medium-sized suppliers and save significant sums.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Is not the problem with the Bill the fact that it locks the stable door after the horse has bolted? Energy companies have jacked up their prices ever since whispers of an energy cap surfaced, such that there is a nice cushion that they can continue to benefit from enormously over the coming months.

Greg Clark: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman. As I will go on to explain, part of the problem that we are addressing is that the competition authorities have for some time identified this tendency on the part of companies, and the Bill’s proposals will give Ofgem the power to correct that. He brings me to my next point: for all the progress that has been made since privatisation, it is clear that the market is not perfect. That is indeed why the coalition Government referred the industry to the Competition and Markets Authority to assess how competitive the retail market was.

In 2016, the CMA concluded, following a two-year investigation, that “our view is that the overarching feature of weak customer response gives suppliers a position of unilateral market power concerning their inactive customer base and that suppliers have the ability to exploit such a position through their pricing policies...by pricing their standard variable tariffs materially above a level that can be justified by cost differences from their nonstandard tariffs; and/or by pricing above a level that is justified by the costs incurred in operating an efficient domestic retail supply business.”

The CMA identified the detriment to consumers—that is, how much consumers are overpaying compared with a fully competitive market—at an average of £1.4 billion a year. This comes from the approach to pricing that is practised by the biggest six energy companies, which for the most part, inherited their customers from previous monopolies. Their approach is to charge their customers on default tariffs much more than those who engage in the competitive part of the market. Currently, the differential for the big six stands at around £300 a year. Those paying the default tariff are much more likely to be in reduced circumstances; 80% of households with an income of less than £18,000 did not switch supplier in the past three years.

From the outset, the UK’s energy market has had a regulator whose responsibility is to act in the interests of consumers. Indeed, if we look back, we can see that Britain has long been a pioneer in not only the privatisation and liberalisation of industries but the regulation of these utility industries, too. Indeed, the British model of privatising state-owned monopolies is to liberalise the market to allow new competitors in and to protect consumers against the power of incumbents—from BT to British Gas—which enjoy an advantage of inertia and loyalty. That has always been recognised in our regulatory arrangements.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a very important point about regulation, but is not part of the context of the Bill the fact that the regulator, Ofgem, was far too slow to respond to the pressures on people, particularly those on low incomes and in vulnerable households?

Greg Clark: I agree with my right hon. Friend. Friend, and I was making the point that we have long been a pioneer in regulation, which has meant adapting regulation to the changing circumstances. We started with RPI minus X, and that evolved into different models, including looking at the regulated asset base. In my view, it is necessary to keep up with our traditions of acting boldly to protect consumers’ interests, and we should be agile in response to new behaviours, especially those brought on by new technologies.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I find myself in agreement with the Secretary of State and shall support the Bill. Indeed, I am in agreement with the Prime Minister that the energy market is broken and that customers are being ripped off. The importance of this legislation will be that Governments of whatever colour and the regulator cannot blame each other when something happens in future. There will be a framework that the Government, the regulator and the energy companies understand, and that is why we need legislation.

Greg Clark: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I was saying in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) that I think the regulator should be more agile in responding to the behaviour that had come about. In fact, the energy companies themselves should have recognised this, and one thing that they said to me was that none of them wanted to act individually and that they would prefer to have a consistent approach.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The Secretary of State is making a valid case for the Bill, which, after all, is all about fairness for the consumer, but will he comment on the fact that we do not want the Bill to reduce competitiveness in the industry—I am sure that
Greg Clark: There already is a cap for those on prepayment meters, and that is being extended to some of those who are identified as the most vulnerable. The reason for this more general scope is that not everyone can be identified through the receipt of particular benefits—that does not comprise the whole population of those who are vulnerable—so the Bill proposes a backstop.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way and I welcome the Bill, which will do a great deal to reduce the energy prices paid by consumers. On the point about helping the most vulnerable customers, one issue that we have is that data about who those customers are is not shared with energy companies. The Cabinet Office already has a consultation on showing this data as part of the Digital Economy Act 2017, and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has announced another consultation. When will the Department get on and give the powers to enable the data to be shared, so that we can protect the most vulnerable customers?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. The statutory instrument that will allow that data sharing will be tabled shortly, before this Bill, which we hope will make rapid progress, receives Royal Assent. She is absolutely right.

I was explaining that the original RPI minus X model, which required annual reductions in prices by incumbents, was followed around the world, but with new developments in technology and practice, it is vital to keep our regulatory system up-to-date. In recent years, it has become more and more possible for suppliers to have extensive information on the habits and behaviour of individual consumers—often more information than the consumers know about their own habits, which are studied so minutely. Incumbent suppliers can identify which of their consumers do not respond to higher prices and instead display loyalty to what they might think of as a long-standing and trusted supplier. They can then penalise those customers with ever-higher prices.

The CMA identified the problem and recommended that certain consumers, those on prepayment meters, be protected from such pricing behaviour. It also recommended measures to drive up the rates of switching. The roll-out of smart meters in particular can make information that is currently only available to the incumbent supplier available to other potential suppliers, with the customer’s permission, which is what everyone wants to be able to drive up competition.

In its report, the CMA was in two minds about whether that action was sufficient, and a minority report thought that such remedies, including smart meters, would not come soon enough to eradicate this detriment quickly enough. The minority report said:

“The harm which is presently inflicted on households...is very severe...the remedies proposed for the large majority of households will take some time to come into effect. That is why...they must be supplemented by a wider price control designed to give household customers adequate and timely protection from very high current levels of overcharging”.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I agree with the report that the march of technology was not correcting the market quickly enough, but there is no doubt that the...
arrangement of all this technology in the energy system is creating a market that will benefit consumers in the future. Can the Secretary of State reassure us that while the Bill provides a temporary measure to correct the current market, it will in no way impede the arrival of the digitised market that will be so greatly to consumers’ advantage in the future?

**Greg Clark:** My hon. Friend has captured the position very succinctly. That is exactly the point. These remedies will introduce more competition based on technology, allowing consumers to have access to the data that will drive it. However, it will take a few years for that to come into effect, so the Bill is doing what my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) advocated—it is addressing the current problem with greater agility than the regulator has shown.

In 2016, the CMA’s minority report stated:

“These customers are exposed to the prospect of excessive prices on a scale which might amount of many billions of pounds of harm over the next four years”.

Experience has shown that the CMA was right. In the last few years, prices for customers on the standard variable and default tariffs have not declined; in fact, they have continued to increase, in some cases by double digits. There has certainly been no change in the behaviour of many of the companies.

**Yvonne Fovargue** (Makerfield) (Lab): I support the Bill, but does the Secretary of State not agree that, while it may tackle the so-called loyalty penalty for certain customers, more needs to be done to tackle the loyalty penalty in other markets, which, according to Citizens Advice, costs the most vulnerable and possibly the oldest customers about £900 a year?

**Greg Clark:** The Bill focuses narrowly on a problem that the independent inquiry has exposed as being very significant. As I have said, 10% of the annual expenditure of the poorest households is on energy. I recognise that we need to be agile in our regulatory system, and I hope that the behaviour of companies in other markets will reflect the fact that it is not acceptable to use information to ratchet up the amount paid by vulnerable consumers in particular. This is a regulated market with a regulator that is there to protect the interests of consumers, and I think it right for the Bill to focus on that.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): I fully support the Bill, but I have a question about Ofgem. The Secretary of State has mentioned a change in the behaviour of the energy companies, but what about a change in the behaviour of Ofgem in increasing productivity and being more on the ball? So far it has failed consumers.

**Greg Clark:** I too would like to see greater agility on the part of the regulator. It seems to me that its powers would have allowed these actions to be taken under its existing remit, and it is a matter of regret that we have to introduce a Bill to compel it to act in this way. I concede, however—that this was made clear in evidence given to the Select Committee on which my hon. Friend serves—that in recent months the current management of Ofgem have displayed more understanding of the need to act to protect consumers.

**Caroline Flint** (Don Valley) (Lab): Do the Government not already have powers, under section 26 of the Energy Act 2010, to introduce a price cap if one group of customers is treated less favourably than others by an energy supplier? Ofgem fears that if it used its powers, there would be a ruling against it and it would end up in the courts. Our purpose today, and my purpose in supporting the Bill, is to lay out once and for all the powers to introduce a price cap for people who are losing out.

**Greg Clark:** It is true that Ofgem has said that it might be challenged in the courts. I do not think we should be afraid of testing arguments in the courts, and I would have preferred to see that happen. The statute that the right hon. Lady mentions would not enable the gap to be closed in a way that would allow competition to continue in the other part of the market—other Members have raised that matter. It would require a closing of the gap, but that could take place by means of the deletion of other tariffs, which is not what we want.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): I fully support the effort to lower energy prices, and competitive markets should be able to do that. Last week we were very short of both gas and electricity. There seems to be a capacity problem, and we are going to close a load of coal power stations. What action is being taken to expand capacity to increase the chance of competitive prices?

**Greg Clark:** The capacity auction arrangements that have been pursued over the last few years have been very successful. We have had a higher margin this winter than last, and the prices of securing that capacity for future years have fallen in successive auctions. My right hon. Friend is right to raise the question, but the framework is actually delivering more resilience than has been delivered in the past.

**James Heappey**: My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) made a good point, but does the Secretary of State agree that it is not just additional capacity that is required, but more flexibility in the system so that we can make existing capacity work better?

**Greg Clark:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have already had the pleasure of debating that issue. The hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) has spent many hours in Committee scrutinising the Smart Meters Bill, which will contribute to making the energy system more interactive and therefore more resilient.

The Bill follows precisely the advice to set a non-renewable price cap for a short period while competition increases. Address the problem was one of the commitments made by the Prime Minister when she entered Downing Street. I recognise the important campaigning work done by my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) and, indeed, by the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint).

The Bill comes to us today having been scrutinised in draft by the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. I am very grateful to the Committee, and to its Chair and members, for their swift yet thorough scrutiny. The Committee took evidence from a wide...
range of stakeholders and produced a well-considered report. It agreed with the CMA's minority report and with the Government’s proposed approach.

The Bill has been supported by consumer groups and, indeed, by many energy suppliers. Citizens Advice report. It agreed with the CMA’s minority report and produced a well-considered range of stakeholders.

Greg Clark:

We welcome the…Bill, which will prevent loyal customers being ripped-off”.

Octopus Energy, one of the newer and more innovative entrants to the market, has called the Bill:

“A crucial step towards a fair energy market in which energy suppliers compete to offer their customers the best value and service”.

The Bill constitutes a sensible intervention to address a specific problem in the market. The Government are not setting prices, and this is not a price freeze. Such a freeze could disadvantage consumers by leaving them stuck on high prices when underlying costs fall, or force energy suppliers to face the entire risk of international commodity markets. Subject to parliamentary approval, the Bill will require Ofgem to cap domestic standard variable and default tariffs until 2020. It will be for Ofgem to decide the methodology and the level of the cap, as appropriate. The cap will stay in place until the end of 2020. Ofgem will then be required to assess the conditions for effective competition in the market and make a report and recommendation to the Government, which I am sure the House and its Select Committees will consider as well.

The price cap can be continued for one year at a time up to the end of 2023, when a sunset clause will come into effect. The Government have no wish for the price cap to become a permanent feature of the landscape. The inclusion of the sunset clause relates directly to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) that we need to address the problem by increasing competition. Ofgem currently has the power to impose a cap for vulnerable consumers, and is taking steps to do that. When consumers make an active choice to opt for green standard variable or default tariffs, they will be able to continue to pay extra for such tariffs if they choose, to prevent unintended consequences. That was a very helpful recommendation from the Select Committee, and I can confirm that all of its recommendations have been accepted in full and are reflected in the Bill before the House today.

The Government want the market to thrive. We continue to promote competition as the best driver of value and services for consumers.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Secretary of State talks about the setting of the cap, and setting it at the right level in the Bill is incredibly important. If it is too high, it will not achieve its objectives; if it is too low, there is a danger that some of the new entrants into the market will fail. The power is with Ofgem, but we have already heard that Ofgem has not been exactly brilliant in exercising its existing powers. Is the Secretary of State confident in Ofgem’s ability to set the cap at the right level?

Greg Clark: I am. There has been recognition from Ofgem that this role is perhaps more important than was suggested by the attention it has been given in the past. Most observers recognise that the work on setting the cap for consumers on prepayment meters has been effective and that competition still exists in the market.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend assure me that any changes to the price cap will also take into account those on prepayment meters, so that if, for example, the price cap changes every six months, that is taken into account for those on prepayment meters or prepayment cards and they are not disadvantaged?

Greg Clark: The arrangements for prepayment meters will continue separately from these provisions, not least because the costs of the prepayment meter are different from those of consumers on normal meters, and that must not be used to the disadvantage of those consumers.

The price cap must be in place as soon as possible, and our intention is that it should be by the end of the year subject to progress in this House and the other place. Ofgem is undertaking preparatory work alongside the consideration of the Bill by Parliament. The Bill will require Ofgem to put the price cap in place as soon as possible after the Bill is enacted.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The House wants to help those in vulnerable circumstances in particular. My right hon. Friend alluded earlier to the provisions of the Digital Economy Act 2017, which will give suppliers access to customers in difficult circumstances. At that point, if we do not take action through legislation, will my right hon. Friend work with the industry to develop best practice so that suppliers seek out their vulnerable customers and do whatever they can to get them on to the lowest tariffs?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and my Department will work closely with Ofgem to ensure that those consumers can benefit from these provisions.

Albert Owen: The regulator will need time to consult before the Bill’s provisions are enacted. Is the right hon. Gentleman confident that, with the Bill being put before both Houses of Parliament today, customers will be able to benefit from it this winter?

Greg Clark: I am indeed confident of that, and it is one of the reasons why I am so grateful for the swift attention of the Committee on which the hon. Gentleman served in giving the Bill pre-legislative scrutiny and taking evidence from expert witnesses.

As I said earlier, the Bill has been constructed to be proportionate and to be directed at a particular problem that we expect to be temporary. On that basis, I hope it will enjoy support from across the House and we can swiftly progress it so that we can correct an intolerable situation in which consumers have been exposed to paying £1.4 billion more than they would in a competitive market. That abuse should end. This Bill will give Ofgem not only the ability to do so, but the requirement that it should do so, and I commend it to the House.

3.4 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I am pleased that the Bill is before the House today, but I must express my exasperation that it has taken so long
to get to this point. The 2017 Conservative manifesto committed to implementing an energy price cap that would protect 17 million households. The Government then repeatedly rowed back on that promise, passing responsibility to Ofgem, which made it clear that legislation was required. After months of to-ing and fro-ing, the Prime Minister reintroduced her commitment in her conference speech, and finally, on 11 October, a draft Bill was published. That Bill was then passed to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee for pre-legislative scrutiny, which, due to the thorough work rightly done by colleagues, was not completed until mid-February. At the same time, a leaked conversation between the civil service and an energy investor seemed to suggest that the Government had no intention of seeing through the legislation. So yes, I was relieved last week to finally see the Bill introduced to Parliament, and I welcome the Government’s foray into a policy that they previously denounced as Marxist, but it remains the case that, as a result of this Government’s inaction, millions of households have been left to scrape through the winter facing a choice between cold homes or astronomical bills. As all hon. Members will be aware, the UK experienced one of its coldest periods for decades over the past week, with the Met Office reporting that the UK had officially broken its record for the lowest March temperatures in a 24-hour period on Friday. As a result of this Government’s dithering and delay, the 4 million households currently living in fuel poverty, 1 million of which include a disabled person, will be receiving whopping bills at the end of the month. Startlingly, the latest figures from National Energy Action for the winter of 2016-17 show that excess winter deaths were 39.5% higher than in the year before, with an estimated 34,300 excess winter deaths in England and Wales.

James Heappey: The hon. Lady underlines the fact that the harshness of the recent weather will have increased energy bills for millions of people. Was she therefore as impressed as I was by the speed at which emergency payments were made to the most vulnerable to help them with their additional heating costs?

Rebecca Long Bailey: The emergency payments were certainly welcome—I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comment—but the fact remains that this price cap should have been in place this winter and it was not.

National Energy Action also found that each year an average of 9,700 people die due to living in a cold home. That equates to 80 people per day, the same number of people who die from breast or prostate cancer each year. It has been Labour party policy since 2013 to introduce a price cap on consumer energy bills, and although the principle of this Bill is positive, I remain concerned that, as drafted, it does not go far enough.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddsbury) (Con): Given that electricity prices rose by 44% between 2003 and 2007, will the hon. Lady outline what action the Labour Government took in their 13 years in power to address this issue?

Rebecca Long Bailey: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point. I think that both sides of the House have reached something of a consensus on our energy market. People on the right and left—wherever they place themselves on the political spectrum—agree that our energy market is fundamentally broken and needs to be reviewed. It is interesting that the Government put their own commission in place, under Dieter Helm, but we have had no response from them so far about the proposals it made.

I have several issues with the Bill as drafted, but I start with the fact that it does not provide any direction from the Secretary of State on his preferred level of cap, which effectively passes the buck to Ofgem. The Bill merely states:

“The Authority must exercise its functions...with a view to protecting existing and future domestic customers who pay standard variable and default rates”

In doing so, Ofgem must consider a number of factors, including creating incentives for suppliers to improve efficiency, enabling suppliers to compete effectively, maintaining incentives to switch between suppliers, and the need to ensure that holders of supply licences who operate efficiently are able to finance activities authorised by that licence.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): With respect, I dispute the hon. Lady’s claim that we are in accord on energy policy. The Opposition’s stated policy is to proceed with wholesale nationalisation, which Government Members strongly disagree with. Does she not accept that renationalising National Grid and the energy sector would be antithetical to driving down prices, which is what we all want?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the Labour party’s manifesto, which clearly states that we wish to increase competition in the energy market by creating regional suppliers. We want to promote fair and transparent competition within the energy market, but unfortunately the Government do not advocate a similar position. We hope to fine-tune aspects of the Bill as it goes through the House so that competition in the energy market will be effective, fair and transparent.

Gareth Thomas: The hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) deliberately misinterprets our policy. The shadow Chancellor has committed the Labour party to supporting a doubling of the co-operative sector. Energy co-operatives do not mean nationalisation, but they do amount to democratic public ownership. Will my hon. Friend re-endorse the commitment to see more energy co-operatives in the market?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I wholeheartedly support my hon. Friend’s fantastic point. I think that our manifesto commitments have been misrepresented or, in the case of the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), overstated. I again encourage him to read our manifesto, which encourages competition in the energy market while also considering some of its fundamental problems, such as in relation to grid ownership. I will address those points later in my speech.

With regard to the factors that Ofgem must consider, the problem is that although the Opposition are not averse to these principles, at present they are at best ambiguous, and there is no duty to consult on how such measures can be accurately quantified. Perhaps the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth will confirm...
how these measures will be quantified. Will they form part of Ofgem's cap methodology consultation? If not, how will Ofgem determine these ambiguous proposals?

Speaking of those guidelines, Energy UK has highlighted the uncertainty in which the provisions are shrouded. Indeed, The Guardian’s financial editor recently commented of the chief executive of Ofgem:

“At best, he is being sent mixed messages by government. At worst, he is being asked to deliver contradictory goals.”

We recognise that Ofgem will consult on the cap methodology to be used, but has the Secretary of State given any indication to Ofgem of the final outcome he wants to see? The Prime Minister promised that £100 would be knocked off 17 million household bills, but nothing in the Bill will ensure that that happens.

Labour has confirmed that we would introduce an immediate emergency price cap to ensure that the average dual fuel household bill remains below £1,000 a year. Had that policy been in place since 2010, the average customer would have saved more than £1,000 on their bills by now. Will the Minister confirm whether the final cap will go anywhere near Labour’s proposals, or indeed anywhere near the Prime Minister’s promise?

Just as ambiguous is the mechanism for deciding whether to extend the cap beyond the end of 2020. The Bill merely states:

“The Authority must carry out a review into whether conditions are in place for effective competition for domestic supply contracts.”

It does stipulate that the review must include an assessment of progress made in installing smart meters, but unfortunately that is as good as it gets. The industry has expressed concern that this provision is unclear. I agree. For example, Energy UK says that there is an absence of a “clear and realistic definition of effective competition”. Which? says:

“the criteria for effective competition are not defined so it is not certain under what circumstances the cap will be lifted or how its success will be judged.”

Will the Secretary of State issue any further guidance on what the conditions for effective competition might be, or are we simply deferring to Ofgem to determine that without question?

Mark Pawsey: Does the hon. Lady support the sunset clause, which means that this legislation will not apply indefinitely as we will reach a stage where there is sufficient competition, or would she rather see a permanent price cap that lasts forever?

Rebecca Long Bailey: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I will refer to this later in my submission. The Bill does not provide an answer to the broken energy market; it is simply a sticking plaster while the energy market is reformed. We would not expect the provision to be in place for a prolonged period. We are not openly against sunset provisions, although we might dispute how they are drafted, which we will explore in Committee.

In considering the cap removal, I must raise an issue that was highlighted recently by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. It found that vulnerable and low-income people were especially affected by poor-value tariffs, with 83% of those living in social rented housing, 75% of those on low incomes, 73% of those with no qualifications and 74% of disabled customers on a standard variable contract. It was clear from the Committee’s findings that, even with the advent of smart meters, those groups will still require protection from overcharging. I therefore urge the Government to consider representations by charities such as Scope, which has called for clause 7 to be amended to ensure that Ofgem, when it considers “effective competition”, has regard to the impact of removing or extending the cap in relation to vulnerable and disabled customers.

Finally, on the drafting of the Bill, I am concerned that there is no guarantee that the price cap will be in place this winter, despite the Secretary of State’s earlier assertions. The Bill states that Ofgem must introduce a cap “as soon as practicable” after it is passed, but Ofgem has already said that it would take around five months after a Bill receives Royal Assent to enact a price cap because it has a statutory duty to consult power companies. This morning Ofgem has said that it “will look to set the level of the cap over the autumn and bring the cap into effect at the end of this year”.

It therefore seems that the cap will not even be in place when the weather turns in autumn this year. I think that the Bill would be greatly improved by the inclusion of a hard deadline by which the cap must be in place, and Labour will be seeking to include such a deadline in Committee.

Given that the Government have already set the date for Committee consideration as 15 March, it would be encouraging if they provided a clear date for cap implementation because, even accounting for the relevant consultation periods set out in the Bill, it would be possible to introduce the cap earlier than next winter. Indeed, my advice is that including such a date might even lay to rest suggestions in some press reports that the big six, and indeed some members of the Cabinet, have been lobbying the Secretary of State to procrastinate or even drop the Bill entirely.

James Heappey: The shadow Secretary of State is kind to give way to me a second time. Does she agree that another option she might consider to help to introduce the cap as quickly as possible would be for her party to pledge its full support in helping to get the Bill through the House and the other place as quickly as possible?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that very helpful comment. I have not opposed the Bill in any of my comments so far; I am providing helpful advice. We support the principle of a price cap and want it to be introduced in the most efficient and detailed way possible.

I think that there is consensus across the House that the energy price cap is no more than a sticking plaster, and that much deeper problems within the UK’s energy market need to be addressed. The market is fundamentally broken. Electricity bills soared by 20% between 2007 and 2013, while in the past year alone, every household in the UK paid £120 for dividends to energy company shareholders. Over the past few months, report after report and news story after news story have detailed the unfairness of the current system, but it must be noted that the final bills that consumers face are not simply a consequence of manipulation by some supply companies.
As the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee has highlighted, network costs make up the second highest element of a dual fuel energy bill.

The Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit found last year that the six distribution network operators made an average profit margin after tax of 32% a year between 2010 and 2015, equating to £10 billion over six years. At the same time, shareholders received £5.1 billion in dividends. In a subsequent report, the ECIU calculated that electricity network companies’ exceptionally high profits are set to add £20 to household energy bills this year. Moreover, analysis by Citizens Advice last year calculated that network operators, including National Grid, had made £7.5 billion in unjustified profits, which it thinks should be returned to consumers. Quite frankly, that is the exploitation of a natural monopoly. It is not a market and there is no effective competition, and I want to hear how the Minister will deal with competition within this element of the energy market.

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way a second time. Is it not a problem—and deeply ironic—that Conservative Members should defend an energy system in which foreign nationalised companies have more control and earn more income and wealth from the distribution and supply of British energy than the British citizenry?

Rebecca Long Bailey: My hon. Friend makes a fantastic point. Many people across Britain find the situation absurd.

As I said, I welcome the Minister’s comments about how she will tackle network exploitation but, along with the BEIS Committee, the Opposition are closely monitoring the next phase of network regulation. We also wonder whether the Minister will shine a little more light on what that might entail, what benchmark the Government have set as their acceptable level of regulation, and what actions she will take if Ofgem’s proposals are insufficient, as was the case with the initial price cap proposals.

The Labour party has been clear that it will not allow the exploitation to continue. We will radically reform the UK’s energy system, not just tinker around the edges, and if the Government are serious about reforming the market and protecting consumers, it is about time that they keep up. Sadly, however, the Secretary of State’s opening remarks were rather thin on proposals for long-term market reform. Reform of the market is not just critical in order to instil fairness and affordability, but vital to ensure that Britain has an energy system fit for the future.

We are experiencing a pace of technological change within the energy sector that has never been seen before. Batteries, storage and smart systems are transforming demand and supply. There is a move to smarter, more decentralised forms of energy generation and supply, emulating many of the models we have seen established across Europe, along with the potential of accessing a low-carbon market that is, according to Goldman Sachs, worth over $600 billion.

Dieter Helm, who was commissioned last year by the Government to conduct a review into the cost of energy, said:

“The corporate structures and policies designed for the 20th-century world no longer work well.”

That review had two main findings: first, that the cost of energy is significantly higher than it needs to be to meet the Government’s objectives and, in particular, to be consistent with the Climate Change Act 2008 and to ensure security of supply; and, secondly, that energy policy, regulation and market design are not fit for the purposes of the emerging low-carbon energy market as it undergoes profound technical change. Dieter published his report in late October. It echoed our calls for a change in ownership of the electricity network; unsurprisingly, we heard little from the Government.

Following the report’s publication, the Government launched a call for evidence to gather the views of stakeholders. That process closed on 5 January this year. I have not heard anything from the Government about that, so in the absence of any future energy vision from the Secretary of State today, perhaps the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth will confirm when a response to that consultation will be published and if the Government agree with Dieter Helm’s proposals.

Mark Menzies: The hon. Lady is making suggestions to improve the Bill, so what role does she see for the Competition and Markets Authority to ensure that consumers’ interests are paramount?

Rebecca Long Bailey: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. We would expect all stakeholders to be engaged in the process, because the Bill must suit the entire energy market and deal effectively with competition. As I set out earlier, the Bill, as drafted, does not provide sufficient clarity on what is meant by “effective competition”.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): In answer to the question asked by the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies), the regulator is supposed to represent consumers, but it is not strong enough to do that. The sooner we have a proper inquiry into the energy market the better. I have been saying that for the past seven years.

Rebecca Long Bailey: My hon. Friend makes a fantastic point about the need for a fundamental root-and-branch look into how our energy market functions and what we will expect to see from it if it is to suit our needs.

The Opposition are pleased that the Government have caught up and finally brought forward legislation to ensure that a price cap is implemented, but the Bill is frankly too little, too late, for millions of people who will not feel benefit this winter and nor, it would seem, for half of next winter. This sticking plaster is only guaranteed to be in place until the end of 2020, so the Government need urgently to bring forward radical proposals for long-term reform of the energy market. We have already set out a clear plan, and it is time that this Government started to catch up.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As Members can see, many colleagues are trying to get in on this debate. If Members could stick to eight minutes, we will be able to get everyone in without having to impose a time limit. I call John Penrose.
Today is a great day. To those who say that politicians never deliver on their election promises, we can collectively send a blaring foghorn reply of “You’re wrong.” Today’s energy price cap Bill is an incredibly rare political unicorn: a pledge that not only has cross-party support, but is being fulfilled. As the organiser of the cross-party letter, which gathered an exceptional and unprecedented 213 MPs’ signatures, I thank my co-convenors, the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), for their help. I also thank every MP who signed the letter and the Ministers who have listened and brought its contents forward. Without their help, we would not be here today.

The Secretary of State has already ably described the problem. It is a two-tier market in which millions of customers are penalised for being loyal. Sneaky price hikes mean that people who have forgotten to switch are gouged on super-expensive rates to which they never agreed. Customers are being taken for granted and taken for a ride. So it is a great day, but in spite of all that we still have some pitfalls to step around. First, it is vital that the price cap is temporary. The long-term answer for most people is not an endless cap; it is making the customer king and putting them in the driving seat, so that the energy industry provides the same good-value and sensible deals that we take for granted in every other walk of life.

Stephen Crabb: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his hard work in ensuring that the Bill was brought forward. He makes an important point about consumers. He described them as behaving in a “loyal” way, but for many people, particularly the most vulnerable and those on the lowest incomes, this is about inertia. We need to change behaviours and get better engagement from some of the most vulnerable energy customers, which will be key to making this Bill work.

John Penrose: My right hon. Friend is a co-signatory to the letter, for which I thank him, and he makes an important point. It is not just vulnerable customers, of course; it is the many of the rest of us who are time poor. This is a far broader question than just vulnerable customers, although they are a key part of it. Many other families, either because they are loyal or because they have not got round to it, have not switched. We need to persuade them to change their behaviour, and we need to change the market to help them to do so.

Choosing a new supplier should be no more complicated than changing our brand of coffee or corn flakes. The big six should have to work a lot harder to attract and keep our business. To be fair, as we have heard and as I think my right hon. Friend was alluding to, the regulator, Ofgem, has made a start. We have more than 50 new competing firms that are scrambling to take business off the big six. Smart meters are coming, and switching is slowly getting simpler, quicker, easier and less scary.

The Bill rightly says that the price cap should die after a couple of years, but what about the other details? Price caps, as we have heard, are dangerous things. They are fiendishly difficult to get right: they drive suppliers away if the price is set too low, and they gouge customers if the price is set too high.

So how do we design a cap that does not make things worse rather than better? Well, the Bill says that the price will be set by an all-knowing committee of Ofgem regulators every six months, but the international price of energy moves around every day. Although I am sure Ofgem is full of clever and well-intentioned people, no one is that clever. Any energy trader will tell us it is impossible to know what the price will be in the next six minutes, let alone the next six months.

Caroline Flint: Some 5 million people are already benefiting from the price cap for those on prepayment meters or on the warm home discount, and Ofgem is in charge of that. Why cannot it be trusted to extend its skill to a wider group of customers?

John Penrose: The right hon. Lady is one of the co-organisers of the letter, and I thank her again for her help. No matter how clever, good and high calibre the people on the committee, people are just not as good as the market at price discovery, provided the market runs properly. When she was shadow Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, I heard her talk about having to get a better energy market with better price discovery and having to re-establish an energy pool precisely because of that point. Ofgem, no matter how hard it tries or how well intentioned it may be, just will not get it right a large proportion of the time.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): My hon. Friend knows a great deal about this issue. Is not the point that this is not a price freeze but a price cap? Those two things are different and allow a sensible regulator, as the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) suggests, to set a ceiling rather than an absolute price.

John Penrose: I agree that there is a difference between a freeze and a cap, but there are a couple of things that, none the less, make it an extremely risky and dangerous proposition to go down that road. For example, what if Ofgem picks a number and the international price of energy falls the very next day? What then? Switching customers in the ultra-competitive part of the market would find their prices drop quickly as energy firms react to the news, but Ofgem’s capped prices for loyal, non-switching customers on default tariffs—that is the example my hon. Friend talks about—would not move at all for another six months, when the cap can be reset according to the terms of the Bill. In that situation, the cap would be ineffective at protecting customers if the price is set too high.

It is not just me who is worried about that. Which? says it is “not certain that customers on a capped default tariff will benefit as market conditions change in future”.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, I have some sympathy with his arguments. Does he recognise that, as drafted, the Bill enables
Ofgem to set the cap by formula, which could be related to wholesale prices and have the flexibility required to overcome the problem he describes?

John Penrose: I wish I shared my right hon. Friend’s confidence in Ofgem. All the discussion of the Bill so far from Ministers, from comments on the Bill and from people inside Ofgem is not what he describes. They are talking about an absolute cap in which people sit in a room and come up with a number, which stays that way until it is reset after six months—that is the way the Bill is drafted.

If the Bill can be amended in a way that allows it to be far more flexible—that is one of the things I hope to encourage both Members here present and Ministers at later stages to consider—we might be able to iron out some of these issues, but I do not share my right hon. Friend’s optimism in that regard.

Sir Oliver Letwin: Looking at clause 2(1)(b), as drafted, it seems perfectly clear to me that Ofgem will have to set out how the cap is to be calculated, which positively points in the direction of a formulaic rather than an absolute position.

John Penrose: But as my right hon. Friend will know, it is also stated elsewhere, particularly in the guidance and in many of the other documents on this, that we are looking at an absolute cap. The word “absolute” is used repeatedly, and it has been used repeatedly to me in conversations with Ministers. If we can remove those other points as well, so that they are not going to push us in the direction I worry about, many people here would be a great deal more reassured. We will have to come back to this on Report.

Sir Oliver Letwin: rose—

John Penrose: I will give way one more time and then I will have to make some progress, because Madam Deputy Speaker is catching my eye.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I certainly will not press the point beyond this. Does my hon. Friend not need to distinguish between absolute, which means not relative—to offer tariffs—and formulaic and flexible, which the drafting certainly does allow, as opposed to a point that is set by a Committee for six months?

John Penrose: We will need to come back to this matter, but it would be tremendously helpful if Ofgem came up with some clarifications on it, because that might reassure me and others. So far I have had nothing to reassure me in that direction—in fact, quite the opposite.

As I was saying, it is not just me who is worried about this: both Which? and uSwitch worry it will mean cheaper fixed deals will be withdrawn from the market; and leading challenger energy firms such as Octopus Energy, Utilita Energy, Utility Warehouse, Ebico and Good Energy are all worried that Ofgem’s price-fixing efforts will inevitably get it wrong. The lawyers and lobbyists for the big six are licking their lips at the prospect of all those fat fees from legal challenges and persuasive lunches. It is no coincidence that they are already demanding the Bill should allow expensive and time-consuming appeals to the Competition and Markets Authority whenever Ofgem’s committee sets a price.

If all these people think the Bill’s details create problems, what is the alternative? What needs to change? The thing to remember is that default tariff prices are just a symptom of a much deeper problem. The moral flaw at the heart of this market—the thing that sticks in the throat—is the mark-up loyal customers are charged compared with competitive switching deals. I am talking about the enormous, unjustified, sneaky price hike the big six hit people with, without their consent, just because they are loyal or simply too busy to switch. That is the unfairness, the burning injustice and the thing that drives customers—our constituents—to write to each and every one of us demanding, “This must change”. If the problem is the mark-up as between the competitive deals and the default tariffs, why does the Bill only address half the problem—the price of the default tariffs—rather than the gap between the two? If we are really serious about solving the problem, why not cap the gap instead? A cap that creates a maximum mark-up would deal directly with this moral underlying problem—the cause of the rip-off—rather than only half of it. It would mean default tariffs would have to move in tandem with the ultra-competitive, consumer-friendly part of the market. People who took the trouble to switch would still get the best deals, but customers who forgot or did not want to switch would get protection, too.

Capping the gap is future-proof as well. If the international price of energy fell suddenly, as we were discussing earlier, it would not just be the competitive switching deals that would get cheaper; the price of capped tariffs would fall, too, and people would not have to wait for six months for Ofgem’s all-knowing committee to meet and change it. Capping the gap would not dilute or derail the all-important underlying market changes which are going to make energy feel competitive and normal either. Customers would still have plenty of incentives to start switching. That is why this Bill and its introduction make this a great day—I meant it when I said it. This Bill is important, even though it is only temporary. It will save millions of customers hundreds of pounds on an essential product. Although it is not perfect and it could be better, it is a very important step. So for the moment, for the sake of the people of the thing, for the Second Reading debate today, let us just celebrate the fact that it is here at all and support it.

3.38 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose). He has clearly done a lot of work on this and is revelling in the fact that the Bill is here today, but I thought for a moment near the end of his speech that he was starting to argue against the principle of a cap. Clearly, I, too, welcome the principle of the legislation, which is intended to limit the amount of money paid by consumers stuck on tariffs above the market rate. It is usually those from the lowest-income households who suffer in that way.

I pay tribute to the ongoing cross-party work by the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare, the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). They have garnered massive support from all parts of the House, and the cross-party letter to the Prime Minister, which was signed by more than 200 Members, helped to build the momentum to get us to this stage, with the Government introducing a Bill to the House.
When in October 2017 the Secretary of State initially announced the Government’s intention to introduce a cap, he stated:

“Over the past 15 years energy prices have risen by over 90% in real terms.”

He also said:

“Customers of these firms have seen their energy bills increase by between 7% and 10% within the past 12 months, increases on prices the CMA had already concluded were too high.”

In the same speech, he acknowledged that despite action by Ofgem to protect a further 1 million households, there would still be

“13 million families paying more than they would in a competitive market.”—[Official Report, 12 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 473-74.]

The Secretary of State’s justification not only illustrates the need for the Bill but confirms that it has taken too long to get to this point.

The headline figure for customer overpayment was £1.4 billion in 2016 alone—that is the poorest and most vulnerable customers subsidising the more wealthy. It is therefore no surprise that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee has criticised Ofgem and the energy suppliers for failing customers. The fact that intervention and protection is required for some 17 million to 18 million households is a stark illustration of the current market failure. In addition, the fact that there has been a debate between the Government and the regulator about whether primary legislation is even required to introduce a price cap is perhaps a further indicator of a market that is not fit for purpose. With all that said, I acknowledge that the Bill represents progress and welcome the fact that the Government are taking steps to make sure that a cap is going to happen, rather than having an ongoing battle with Ofgem.

Customers have an innate suspicion of energy companies, especially when it comes to their profit announcements, or the fact that when wholesale prices drop, they feel they never see a corresponding drop in their energy bills. There needs to be greater clarity on the operation of the market. I understand that energy companies buy in advance and hedge against future wholesale costs; that there are many components to an energy bill; and that profits make up a relatively small part of energy bills. However, unless there is greater clarity on all these matters and an easy-to-understand bill format, customer suspicions will remain. Generic pie charts are fine for matters and an easy-to-understand bill format, customer suspicions will remain. Generic pie charts are fine for matters and an easy-to-understand bill format, customer suspicions will remain. Generic pie charts are fine for matters and an easy-to-understand bill format, customer suspicions will remain.Generic pie charts are fine for matters and an easy-to-understand bill format, customer suspicions will remain. Generic pie charts are fine for matters and an easy-to-understand bill format, customer suspicions will remain. Generic pie charts are fine for matters and an easy-to-understand bill format, customer suspicions will remain.

I accept that a 5% profit cannot be classed as excessive profiteering, but we have to acknowledge that 5% of huge turnover sums still equals a huge profit in terms of actual numbers and the bottom-line figures that the public see. An absolute cap should protect some customers, but if the companies aim to maintain the same profit numbers, there will clearly be losers elsewhere in the system. If the average saving between a big six company’s cheapest tariff and its standard variable tariff is £300 per annum, somebody other than me can do the maths to assess the sort of amounts that these companies will seek to recover from other customers. Arguably, if those other customers were the people who should be able to afford to pay a bit more money, that would mean that any possible cross-subsidies would be working in the right direction, but there is a risk that the companies will just recover the money from elsewhere.

Given that profits, along with VAT, are the joint second-lowest component of a bill, if we are looking to get lower energy bills, the only other way for there to be substantial savings is if the wholesale cost of energy comes down or if the network costs, which are estimated to account for 26% of energy bills, are reduced. I therefore suggest that the market mechanisms for network costs should be reviewed and considered.

On the back of the Government’s intention to introduce this Bill, we have now seen three of the big six—E.ON, SSE and Centrica—announce a move away from standard variable tariffs, and Scottish Power has indicated that it will do likewise. Those companies are now using this strategy as an argument against a cap, but of course they need to acknowledge that it was their inertia on standard variable tariffs that actually led us here in the first place, so they are having that argument once the horse has bolted from the stable.

None the less, we must be careful that the unintended consequence of the cap is not an equalisation effect that drifts towards the higher end of the scale. I understand that is why the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare is calling for a relative cap. However, even a relative cap can have an equalisation effect, eliminating lower level tariffs. I note that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and Citizens Advice, among others, support an absolute cap, which is what is proposed at the moment. However, this strategy needs to be reviewed. With a requirement on Ofgem to consult on the cap methodology, I hope that we will be able to flesh out the risks and thrash out mitigations.

Not surprisingly, the big companies are against the Bill, and, intuitively, that is quite a good thing. However, some of the concerns that have been raised possibly require consideration by the UK Government. There is a suggestion that appeals to the CMA should be allowed, as happens for every price control and every price-regulated sector in the UK. I can see the logic of that, and if appeals to the CMA are allowed, consumer groups, as well as the suppliers, could make representations, so that is not necessarily a concession to the energy companies. Additionally, the companies argue that there needs to be clarity on the conditions on which a cap may be removed or extended in 2020. From the point of view of the investor and of a tariff setting policy, I can understand the argument for further clarity on this matter.

Even the consumer group Which? wants to ensure that there are no unintended consequences that limit the success of the cap and eliminate future competition. It has suggested that Ofgem must: set out clear criteria for effective competition that the price cap will be reviewed against; monitor and evaluate the success of the price cap before, during and after the period it is in place; publish monitoring reports, detailing actions to be taken to mitigate any adverse impacts of competition; and test how the price cap is communicated to consumers and report any negative effect following that engagement.

Hopefully, the Minister will explain how the concerns of some suppliers and, importantly, consumer groups can be mitigated. On energy bills, we must remember that to lower bills and eliminate fuel poverty, the UK Government’s wider energy strategy and welfare strategy...
have to be correct as well. The smart meter roll-out, which we have heard about, is seen as an enabler for smarter, lower tariffs, but that is still unreasonably linked to a 2020 deadline forcing a roll-out of SMETS1 meters rather than a longer roll-out period with more appropriate updated technology that allows for better and easier switching in the future.

The UK Government’s nuclear obsession must end. The National Audit Office has already confirmed the impact that Hinkley will impose on electricity bills. Therefore, looking at additional nuclear and a whole raft of micro reactors makes no sense, especially when costs for offshore and onshore wind are now at an all-time low. Energy policy must be consistent. We cannot have a repeat of the debacle of the removal of the £1 billion of funding for carbon capture and storage. Transmission charges have to be considered, particularly when we have opportunities with renewables and energy storage.

On other mitigation measures, further work needs to be done on home energy measures, and that needs direct Government intervention. All energy companies agree on that, and the Scottish Government lead the way in taking direct intervention. The Scottish Government have committed to a warm homes Bill and a statutory fuel poverty target as well as the roll-out of an ongoing further energy efficiency programme.

This Bill imposes a welcome temporary cap, but during the period that a temporary cap is in place, the UK Government must not only review its effectiveness, but explore other strategies and develop that consistent energy strategy. They could also follow the lead of the Scottish Government and look at a not-for-profit public energy supply company, otherwise, there is no doubt that this Bill will take a classic sticking plaster approach. It might represent a quick political win, but, in the long term, we need to have a solution to high energy bills and fuel poverty.

3.49 pm

Robert Halfon: (Hove) (Con): I apologise for having to leave soon after I have spoken, but I am hosting another event elsewhere in the House of Commons.

High energy costs are felt most significantly by the vulnerable and those on lower incomes, which is why I strongly support the Bill and congratulate both the Business Secretary and the Energy Minister for what they are doing. Those who pay the most for energy are the ones who can least afford it. Eight out of 10 people on high-cost standard tariffs earn £18,000 a year. Scope, the charity for disabled people, found that households with disabled people make up 38% of all fuel-poor households in England. More than a quarter of households with a disabled person—over 4 million households—spend more than £1,500 a year on energy bills, which is why this is a matter of social justice. The Government’s emphasis on the cost of living is incredibly important. It means that suppliers can charge what they please. We have seen in recent weeks how increasing wholesale energy costs have had a knock-on effect on tariffs in smaller providers and those in the big six.

I urge the Minister to look at other issues hitting energy consumers. For example, those who do not pay by direct debit face an extra bill. I had an email only yesterday from someone telling me that they refuse to pay by direct debit, so they have to pay the electricity company—the Co-operative Energy—£200 a year more than if they had signed up by direct debit. We know that the vulnerable often do not pay by direct debit and sometimes do not have bank accounts. Some are paying up to £390 extra a year. This charge is unfair. I urge the Minister to look into these cases.

I also have concerns about the huge wages and the way in which profits are used by the big six bosses. Now, I am not against high wages or profits, but I do not think that these wages are linked to performance. For example, top staff in Centrica get £13.1 million a year, and the chief executive officer of E.ON UK said that his company had £235 million in profits. Although I am not against profits or high wages, wages should be linked to performance and we should ensure that those profits are ploughed back into helping the most vulnerable consumers.

We need a consumer Bill of rights to bolster the position of all energy consumers. It should be easily digestible and understood. To get cheaper tariffs, everybody should know what their energy bills should be and what rights they have. A consumer Bill of rights should ensure access to the lowest possible cost for loyal customers who decide not to switch and end up on the standard tariffs.

Peter Kyle: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Robert Halfon: I would normally be pleased to take interventions but, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will not give way because of the demands on time.

There are a lot of speakers and Madam Deputy Speaker has asked us to cut down our contributions.

My next point is about injecting competition into the market that is currently dominated by the big six. We have a problem because, although this is very much about competition in the private sector, energy is actually a public good. The Government need to do much more to support not-for-profit providers. The hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) mentioned co-operatives, of which I am very supportive. Robin Hood Energy, launched by Nottingham City Council, is an example of a not-for-profit provider. Although we need market competition, we need to look much more at the co-operative model when we are talking about a public good. I do not believe in nationalisation, but I do think that we should have not-for-profit models in essential services, because energy is the lifeblood of our country and, without it, we would be in the dark ages. For too long, to use a well-known phrase, the market has been dominated by the few, not the many.

I very much support the Bill because it is the right thing to do symbolically. It sets the tone of what this Government are about—helping the most vulnerable. It is also the right thing to do practically. To me, this is not an argument about big government or small government; it is simply an argument about good government.
3.55 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon).

I welcome the Bill and look forward to its clauses becoming law in due course, with the impact that will have on energy bills. Of course, Labour first proposed action to tackle excessive energy prices in 2013. I look forward to hearing shortly, I hope, from my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), who was the architect of that policy. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) put it at the time,

“When wholesale prices go up, people pay more. When they come down, they still pay more.”

Between 2010 and 2015, energy bills went up by £300 on average, so in the 2015 Labour party manifesto, we committed to cap energy bills until 2017, ensuring that bills could fall but not rise. That same winter, we committed to giving the regulator the power to cut bills and then to reform the energy market to deliver fairer prices and a better deal for consumers. Like all good ideas that Oppositions have, it has now somewhat belatedly become Government policy. I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Minister on that.

The fact that the energy market is broken is undeniable. It is a feeling shared by Members across the House and, indeed, by all our constituents. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee’s report showed that it is a two-tier market in which customer loyalty is not rewarded but punished with excessive prices. It is totally unacceptable that nearly 60% of customers pay up to £350 more a year for their energy, on average, especially when those customers are the most vulnerable: 83% of those living in socially rented housing, 75% of those on low incomes and 74% of disabled customers are on standard variable tariffs, which we know rip consumers off. It is unacceptable that the exploitative behaviour of some energy providers exacerbates the financial woes of customers who were already facing difficult financial decisions. I do not want to live in a country where so many people are priced out of heating their homes in the winter, or having to choose between sitting in a freezing cold flat and putting food on their table. This Bill is a step in the right direction in addressing some of those concerns.

The big six energy companies insisted in evidence to the Committee that the market was already competitive and delivering fair outcomes and that this action was excessive and unnecessary, but our report showed why that is not the case. The CEO of E.ON told us in evidence that it is fair that customers who do not engage in the market pay more for their energy. We found that this kind of discriminatory pricing is unfair on customers who cannot engage with competition, as opposed to those who can take advantage of it. Centrica admitted in its evidence to making the majority of its profits on expensive standard variable tariffs. It is not alone in that position, as a large majority of all big six customers are on standard variable tariffs, including 68% of Centrica’s customers.

The big six have lobbied intensely to get appeal rights to the Competition and Markets Authority because they want to stop this cap happening by dragging the process through the courts. I am pleased that this Bill rules out that action by those companies. Some argue that switching is increasing and so a cap is not necessary. Although the number of customers switching suppliers has improved recently, it is not improving nearly fast enough, with only a third of customers having switched in the past three years. It is not surprising, given how expensive switching is—one that puts the onus on suppliers to do the right thing. The big six energy companies have brought this cap on themselves by their discriminatory pricing practices.

The BEIS Committee held four evidence sessions and analysed 44 pieces of written evidence as part of our pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Bill. We welcome the Government’s Bill and the intention to put an end to the overcharging of 12 million households on poor-value standard variable and default tariffs.

One of our key recommendations to the Government was that they seek Royal Assent for the Bill before the summer recess, allowing Ofgem time to consult and then set the cap, so that customers do not spend another Christmas facing excessive prices. I welcome the letter from Ofgem today saying that it will be able to meet that timetable, so that we do not go through another winter of excessively high bills. My only disappointment is that this legislation did not come sooner. Last week, temperatures dropped significantly across the whole country. If there had been a price cap in place, families would not have had to worry about rising bills during this unprecedented drop in temperatures.

Following our Select Committee’s work, the Government have accepted all the recommendations that we made, including excluding the possibility of a relative price cap—something that the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) advocated, but which I believe would push up prices for customers who switch, rather than reducing the standard variable tariffs. It seems obvious that that is what would happen. For the big six energy companies, 70% or 80% of their customers are on standard variable tariffs and that is where they earn their profits, so they will not unilaterally drop those prices. Instead, they will increase prices for new customers, to cling on to their profits. That is why excluding the possibility of a relative price cap is the right thing to do.

John Penrose: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; I will try to keep this brief. Does she accept that that criticism about a potential rise in competitive switching deal prices is being levelled by others at the absolute cap? When such a course as she described was experimented with last summer by Centrica, it lost market share hand over fist and was really hurt commercially, so it is unlikely to try that again.

Rachel Reeves: When we took evidence from the big six companies and probed them on where their profits came from, they were very clear that their profits came from the standard variable tariffs. Centrica has a £287 difference between its standard variable tariff and its best tariff, while Scottish Power has a £333 difference between those tariffs. They are earning their profits on the higher tariffs, and I just do not think that they will unilaterally reduce those tariffs, because that will be a hit to their profits, not a slight reduction in the number of new customers they get. The Government are right to exclude that cap, and that is why our Select Committee recommended that.

The Government have also accepted our recommendation to continue encouraging consumer switching. I believe that competition and regulation can co-exist effectively.
Mark Pawsey: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Reeves: I give way to the fellow member of my Committee.

Mark Pawsey: We heard a lot of evidence from the challenger companies. There are 60 suppliers in the energy market now, and while switching rates are not increasing fast enough, they are increasing. Does the hon. Lady share my concern that with a cap, there will be precious little incentive for people to look at alternative suppliers and change and that the rate of switching we have managed to get in recent years will start to fall back?

Rachel Reeves: I hope that does not happen. Ofgem and the Competition and Markets Authority are putting the cap in place to make it easier for customers to switch. Northern Ireland, where there is a price cap, has as much switching as we do. The international examples suggest that we can have switching in a market that also has a price cap.

Peter Kyle: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rachel Reeves: Sorry, I am not going to give way again, otherwise I am going to get into trouble with Madam Deputy Speaker, and I am more scared of her than I am of my hon. Friend.

Peter Kyle: For the time being.

Rachel Reeves: Indeed.

There are two areas where the Government need to take action to ensure that, once the price cap is over in 2021 or 2023, we do not go back to business as usual. First, they need to give greater clarity about what will happen to things such as the energy company obligation and the warm home discount once the price cap goes away.

Secondly, I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment today that the statutory instrument on data sharing to allow energy companies to know who their vulnerable customers are will be tabled before the Bill receives Royal Assent. We need to see that SI and those changes, because the energy companies do not know all the customers who are vulnerable and experiencing financial difficulties. Our Committee is convinced that those two issues will be key in ensuring that, both during and after implementation of the price cap, those who need it most get the protection they need.

The time for action is over-ripe. These rip-off practices cannot be allowed to continue. There is cross-party support for this legislation, and both the Labour and Conservative manifestos at the last election included a commitment to cap energy prices. Now the Government must make that cap a reality before next winter. I strongly urge colleagues across the House to support the Bill, to deliver some fairness to all our constituents.

4.4 pm

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): In the interests of brevity, I want to make one point about the rationale for the cap that I do not think has yet been stated in this debate, and two points to reassure my hon. Friends about issues that have arisen.

On the rationale, it is true that Ramsey pricing—the gouging of so-called loyal or, in other words, inertial customers—is a major issue, but predatory pricing on the other side of the balance sheet is equally important. As the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) said, large suppliers are making uncoventioned surpluses out of the default tariffs, which they are using to cross-subsidise their competitive tariffs to exclude entrants from the market to the greatest possible extent. Once they are deprived of the ability to generate oligopolistic returns from the default tariffs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) mentioned, they will have to do what they are very reluctant to do—namely, recognise more closely the true cost of their own inefficiencies in their more competitive tariffs, thereby allowing much greater penetration of the market by small challengers.

That is why I celebrate the fact that the Government have made the cap a temporary one with reviews. The shadow Secretary of State, when she was engaging in what sounded on this side of the Chamber suspiciously like scraping the barrel to find things to object to, asked the question: how will we know that the time is ripe for the cap to be removed? The answer is when the challengers have actually been able to move into the market in great numbers, because the cross-subsidy in the predatory pricing model has faded away and we therefore have a proper energy supply market.

Of my two crumbs of comfort, I want to offer one directly to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare. We all owe him a great debt of gratitude for banging on about this for a very long time and thinking about it deeply. I assure him that the Bill, whatever anybody may have said about it, clearly allows for a cap that, far from being a freeze, will never be a freeze, as he recognises, and will also not be an absolute point tariff either—or need not be an absolute point tariff. It is entirely in Ofgem’s gift to decide how the cap varies or does not vary depending on circumstances in the external supply markets for energy.

Knowing the current personnel in Ofgem, and having talked to them about this—I am grateful to the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth for facilitating some of those discussions—I am absolutely convinced that they will in fact make this a calculated, formulaic cap that properly reflects the changes in external international circumstances. It will therefore be miles away from the lunacies, although they were politically attractive lunacies at the time, of the Labour party’s original proposal for an absolute price freeze, which, incidentally, would have crippled customers at a time when energy prices were falling.

The second point I want to make to my hon. Friends is that this is the right kind of structure.

John Penrose: I seek a little further reassurance from my right hon. Friend. He seems to be coming up with an elegant mechanism for redesigning an absolute cap to encompass relative caps, but just relative to the wholesale market rather than relative to other tariffs. If so, that would be incredibly elegant. Does he believe that that would allow repricing within the six-month period before the Ofgem committee sat again?

Sir Oliver Letwin: Who knows? The point I was just about to make is that the Bill will hand the whole thing over to Ofgem. This is basically an “Ofgem—you get to
decide it” Bill, so we will only know when we see what it produces. However, I would bet my bottom dollar—not that I have very many bottom dollars—that Ofgem will actually produce a formula, not a number, so the cap will vary continuously, or pretty much continuously. Ofgem is pretty sophisticated economically and it knows perfectly well what happens in the wholesale markets. I do not think it will lock itself in to an unvarying cap.

My main point is structural: the Bill will hand the issue to Ofgem. The good news is that that is not nationalising the pricing of the energy markets. It is not taking it into the hands of the Government. What my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said is true—one of the great achievements of the last 30 or 40 years of the evolution of our utilities markets as a whole is that we have reinvented what the Victorians once had, which we lost in the early and middle part of the 20th century, which was the whole idea of the Government establishing a set of technocrats who are not politically motivated or driven by electoral dynamics, and so are not inclined to do things that are stupid in the long run but look good because they win votes in the short term. Instead, they try to get economically rational results.

Ofgem is such a case. It is not perfect—no regulator is—but it will be a hell of a lot better than politicians at trying to get economically rational results. Instead, they do things that are stupid in the long run but look good because they win votes in the short term. Instead, they try to get economically rational results.

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transmission network to be publicly owned, and I can see the argument for some public ownership of crucial, strategically important power stations to keep the lights on while a broader transition process is taking place. Fundamentally, however, I would like to make the argument for more co-operative, community-owned not-for-profit energy companies. They would own and supply energy, help to decarbonise our existing energy supply, be properly regulated, and, crucially, help to keep in the local community some of the wealth that is generated by energy, which I gently suggest should be strongly encouraged and allowed to emerge. Robin Hood Energy in Nottingham is a great example of that, as are Bristol Energy and Westmill Solar Co-operative.

I finish by gently saying to Government Members that I understand why they are tempted, for political reasons, to attack Opposition Members for looking again at public ownership, but when so many of the energy businesses in this country are owned, or part-owned, by state-owned companies from other countries, it prompts the question why public ownership by the British Government, or by the people of this country, could not be given a bit more encouragement by Ministers.

4.20 pm

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy for bringing forward the Bill and for his hard work on delivering what the Conservative party promised—dealing with unfairness in the energy market. His dedication, and that of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, to ensuring that the most vulnerable customers are not left behind to pay extortionate prices for their energy should be commended by Members on both sides of the House.

However, I cannot escape the fact that, as a Conservative, I question it when any Government seek to intervene in markets. I accept that on occasion markets need some interference. Many require regulation, and unfair practices need to be tackled robustly, but the question is whether the level of market interference is necessary and proportionate. As we consider this Bill, we must ask whether energy companies are in fact employing unfair tactics against their customers. If so, can those customers avoid paying over the odds for electricity and gas? Is introducing a price cap on certain tariffs the only and/or best way to deal with this issue?

I point to significant increases in the number of new energy suppliers—their market share has risen from 2% in 2012 to around 18% in 2017—and the increasing number of customers who are now switching suppliers regularly. I would argue that that shows an improving picture, thanks to the measures that this Secretary of State and his predecessors have implemented to ensure that the energy market is open to new and smaller companies and to encourage switching. As a result of that success, I would argue that the Bill is unnecessary— I would argue that, but I cannot. We committed to introducing the Bill in the Conservative manifesto, and introduce it we shall, but that does not mean that I would have it passed without considering whether its provisions are entirely proportionate or if there are opportunities for improvement. I have marked reservations about a key part of this Bill—or, more to the point, a lack thereof.

No part of the Bill allows energy providers to challenge the level at which Ofgem sets the price cap, other than by judicial review. I have asked a number of written questions on this point, and it appears that the Government are simply not prepared to admit that this is an inadequate means of appeal against the cap. As a non-lawyer, I am always very suspicious of matters that are settled in the court, so let me explain why it is so important to get this aspect of the Bill right, why judicial review is inadequate, and why the right for energy companies to appeal to the Competition and Markets Authority must be written into the Bill.

In January, prior to the Government publishing the Bill, I asked them to name the countries that they had looked at that currently regulate retail energy prices. In reply, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth stated that Canada, the United States, Spain and New Zealand had all been studied. However—this is hugely significant—as their markets were not previously liberalised, or had only recently been liberalised, all are in very different situations from that in this country.

The Government are clear. They accept that what the Bill seeks to do in this country—to impose a price cap in a long-standing liberalised energy market—has never been done before. We are sailing into completely uncharted waters. Should we not therefore proceed with some caution? The Bill does not; it sails off with abandon, trusting Ofgem to set the level of the cap. This major new power has the potential to alter the UK energy market with as yet unknown consequences, as the Government have effectively admitted through their decision not to release quantitative data in their impact assessment, but the Bill provides no check nor expert oversight of Ofgem’s decisions.

Antoinette Sandbach: Judicial review provides a remedy when Ofgem is acting unreasonably. If it is acting reasonably, it would not be possible for the energy companies to review the matter, but what they would do, as evidence given to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee suggests, is to seek to delay the process through endless appeals to the Competition and Markets Authority.

Mark Menzies: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. We would not want a situation in which energy companies, especially big energy companies, seek to delay the implementation of the measure for that reason through appeals to the Competition and Markets Authority. Perhaps the Government could consider having a time-limited window of appeal lasting for a matter of weeks in which any appeal could be looked at by the CMA. I am not sure whether recourse to judicial review, with a case tied up in court and argued by incredibly expensive lawyers, is the solution to the problem. I am not sure where the transparency is in that, and I am not sure that judges are the best people to make a determination. I shall say a little more on that as I proceed.

Appeals on price controls are always to the Competition and Markets Authority. This is consistent with every other comparable sector, including telecoms, water, and aviation, and there are very good reasons why. Energy suppliers, just like National Grid and distribution network operators, invest huge sums into our energy infrastructure. The Treasury has estimated that approximately £250 billion of projects are in the pipeline in the coming years.
All companies require certainty to deliver these projects and they only get this if Ofgem sets a fair and accurate price.

In most cases, if Ofgem gets it wrong, National Grid, DNOs and their shareholders can make their case to the economic experts at the CMA. They know that they have effective recourse against Ofgem’s decision and they have certainty that the CMA will not allow any price cap that places these billions of pounds of investments into our vital energy network at risk. Under the Bill, however, retail suppliers are being sent out on to the high wire only to find that this effective and long-standing safety net has been removed from beneath them. Should Ofgem fail, the Government believe that judicial review will adequately cushion their landing. It will not.

As I have mentioned, the CMA is designed precisely to consider such appeals. As an expert appeals body, it has specialist panels with experience of deciding whether price controls have been set properly through consideration of the economic merits of each case. In contrast, a judicial review would consider only whether Ofgem reached its decision reasonably and in accordance with the relevant procedure. A judge with legal—not economic—training and with no specialist expertise would be asked to assess whether these deeply technical price control issues were fair and accurate.

If we follow through with this and allow such uncertainty to fester, even if only in the minds of our major energy suppliers, what assessment has been done of the impact of that on investment in our energy market? What assessment has been done of the impact that the initiative will have on the prices that consumers on non-default tariffs will be asked to pay? I have asked to be furnished with that information, but the Government do not have it. They answered that this calculation will depend on the methodology employed and the ultimate decision taken by Ofgem when setting the level of the cap.

I can be persuaded to agree that the Bill should pass without considering the future supply in this country—at least for this afternoon. I can be persuaded to agree that Ofgem sets the methodology. I can be persuaded to agree that Ofgem sets the level of the energy price cap. However, I cannot be persuaded, because it defies simple logic, that Ofgem has the sole preserve of wisdom in these matters. I cannot be persuaded that there should be no possible recourse to the Competition and Markets Authority.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend raises reasonable questions about whether the approach that is taken will be fair. That is why Ofgem will have to consult on the methodology. Applying it in particular cases is simply the mechanical application of something that has already had the degree of scrutiny that he is looking for.

Mark Menzies: I thank the Secretary of State for his intervention. Steps like that seek to reassure me. As the Bill makes progress, I will follow its course in detail, particularly on this matter. I want to ensure that the Bill is effective and does not end up disappointing where we hope that it will succeed.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
To expose market failure is not to be against all markets. Despite privatisation, energy has always rightly been a managed market when it comes to changes in our energy generation, contracts for difference and capacity markets, and that is the case today. I believe that, across the House and across British society, it is recognised that certain products, such as energy and water, require a different level of Government intervention and regulation.

Even today, with record levels of switching—about 5 million people switched in 2017—many of the criticisms that I levelled at the energy market in 2011 still apply. The market is still dominated by the big six. Between them, they control 78% of the market. The biggest new entrant has just 1% of market share. Movements in energy prices bear little relation to the movement in wholesale prices. The majority of customers have little faith in switching and have not changed supplier for a decade or more, and, as we all know, the majority sit on expensive default standard variable tariffs. More than 5 million people have been helped with a safeguard tariff. The Bill addresses the 11 million households who are overcharged year in, year out.

So what should we do? Let us build on the cross-party support and, through the Bill, defend the principle of a short-term cap on a failing market. We should not be cowed by the self-interested propaganda that we have heard from opponents of the price cap. At the extreme end, we have Centrica linking its plan to shed jobs up to 2020 with the cap. That is outrageous. Centrica has lived off its nationalised legacy—a sticky customer base that it has treated badly. Business analysts observe that British Gas’s businesses supplying energy to business have been performing poorly and that Centrica’s US operation, Direct Energy, has underperformed. They note that almost 80% of those employed by Centrica are abroad—just one in five are in the UK. While those UK jobs are important, it is little surprise that trade unions representing Centrica employees—Unite the union, GMB and Unison—are rightly sceptical about why UK employees might bear the brunt of the effect of corporate failures internationally under the leadership of Iain Conn.

A cap does not mean an end to competition. A reasonably set upper limit on unit prices that is reviewed every six months allows lots of opportunity for competition beneath the cap. It is not a difficult concept. The cap is a maximum; it is not a requirement to charge prices at that level, and the industry knows that full well. It also knows that it will put a bar on unfair prices, and not before time.

Geraint Davies: I am listening fascinated to my right hon. Friend’s speech. She is aware that there has been a history of oligopoly abuse in terms of delays in changing prices for customers when world commodity prices change, meaning that there are excessive differentials. Does she think it is possible to have a relatively simple system that takes those two factors into account, but also takes the opportunity to encourage renewables?

Caroline Flint: Absolutely, and I am going to come on to renewables. Ministers should beware of any proposal to exempt green tariffs or low-carbon tariffs from the price cap, and let me be clear why. In 75% of days in 2017, wind power supplied more energy than coal power in the UK. Nuclear and renewables are central to our power output in the UK energy market and the generators are well rewarded for that. The notion that any energy provider should charge a premium for so-called green tariffs does not stand up to scrutiny. Consumer support for 100% green energy is welcome, but the idea that they should pay the most expensive tariff cannot be justified. I therefore hope that the Secretary of State will rule that out and deliver a comprehensive cap.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I am listening with increasing admiration to the right hon. Lady’s speech, which reminds me of why there was once a Labour party with which I had a great deal more sympathy than I do at present. I strongly agree with what she says about green tariffs. We want to promote green energy, but to do so on a basis that is economically rational.

Caroline Flint: I welcome the cross-party support that continues to blossom on this issue.

I urge Ministers to ensure that Ofgem is equipped with all the powers it needs to act as a consumer champion, and to deliver both a price cap and penalties for corporate misbehaviour. I have not been uncritical of Ofgem. For too long the regulator did not hold the big six to account for poor customer service. Where fines were issued, companies were allowed to strike a deal to use the so-called fine to subsidise tariffs for new customers—there was nothing for their loyal customers stuck on default tariffs. Thankfully that has changed.

We saw last week the CMA having to rule on a challenge by SSE and EDF against Ofgem when they tried to modify industry rules. Ofgem determined that those modifications would have led to consumers paying a £120 million rebate to generators and said no. Ofgem was immediately challenged. In this instance, the CMA backed Ofgem and the consumer interest was protected, but let us be under no illusion: there is a constant veiled threat that the energy giants will contest its decisions. We need to be certain that Ofgem has the powers and remedies it needs under the Bill so that it can do the job this House expects and does not become a scapegoat for failure.

Finally, may I urge Ministers to use the period of the cap to review the structure of the energy market? Good regulation, fairness and innovation from existing and new players must all be part of a reshaped energy market of the future. Let us get on with it. The Bill has my support; let us give Ofgem the power to act and cap unfair energy bills.

4.38 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): This is an important Bill that comes from a very good manifesto commitment. Our energy market is undoubtedly broken, with millions of consumers stuck on the most expensive tariffs. Many are taken for granted and, arguably, even exploited for their loyalty, and it is right that the Government have intervened to protect them.

In many ways, in delivering this cap we have accepted that we failed over the last few decades to create the culture of switching that we hoped for. That is not to say that impressive progress has not been made; it has been, and we have seen further progress in the last few months, but even if that recent improvement in progress were to continue, we would still have far too many people—disproportionately concentrated among the most vulnerable and the lowest income consumers—left on the most expensive tariffs.
We should also note that some of the biggest energy suppliers have changed the way they operate SVT-type products over the past nine months, which is very welcome. One suspects that they saw what was coming down the tracks. None the less, I know that they will feel aggrieved by the Bill after voluntarily acting to tackle the problem of those stuck on rip-off SVTs.

The progress on switching and the improved behaviour of the big suppliers underlines why the cap need only be temporary. My hope is that the Secretary of State will encourage the industry to respond quickly to the cap so that tariff structures become fairer for the most loyal consumers. Clear criteria for ending the cap would be most welcome. While the cap is in force, let us not take our foot off the accelerator in encouraging more people to start switching. In short, the cap must be regarded as a means to an end, not—I suspect this is the view of some Opposition Members—as an end in itself.

**Bim Afolami:** Does not the Bill show the Government’s general approach to intervention in markets, which we have heard a lot about this afternoon, which is still left markets as a means in themselves, but as a means to an end, which is good, cheap and reliable energy for the British people?

**James Heappey:** My hon. Friend is indeed right. To resort to my former career as a soldier, I hope that the Government see this as a raid into the energy market, rather than an occupation.

In her opening remarks, the shadow Secretary of State made the important point that an amazing energy future is emerging in the margins of our current broken market, although I disagree with her analysis that the Government are not embracing that, because the clean growth strategy is a passionate embrace of those opportunities. Insurgent companies such as Octopus Energy are relishing bringing the new time-of-use tariffs to the market, giving consumers the benefits of fluctuating wholesale energy prices. Others are looking at how localised generation or aggregated shifts in demand might allow consumers to access cheaper energy or monetise their flexibility. Others are enabling by clean tech provided by the supplier for free, with the supplier then monetising the customer’s flexibility in order to make their margin. These and countless other innovations are accelerating our decarbonisation, increasing system flexibility—and therefore our energy security—and will mean lower bills for consumers.

We must also create an energy system that allows the full price-reducing power of clean technologies to bring down prices for the consumer. This will require significant regulatory change in order properly to unlock storage, demand-side response and the advantages of generating and consuming energy locally. We must also encourage the deployment of more renewables, no longer because they are the cleanest method of generation, although they still are, but because they are now so obviously the cheapest.

**Rebecca Pow:** My hon. Friend has great knowledge of this subject. Will he comment on the fact that we need to concentrate not only on energy efficiency, but also on cutting energy waste, particularly in our domestic systems, because there is a lot of great new technology that could be harnessed?

**James Heappey:** I very much agree. Let us be clear that energy efficiency measures are no longer simply barrier technologies—in windows, walls and roofs—but digital technologies that ensure that we use less energy, or that devices immediately stop working when we no longer need them, rather than being left on unnecessarily.

Ofgem has a key role in delivering the Bill, but that work must be no more of a priority for it than ensuring the much-needed regulatory change that will be delivered through the unlocking of wholesale disruption of our energy system and market. Let us be clear that the real prize is not the correction of the old, analogue, broken market system of today, but the arrival of a digitised, decentralised, dynamic and disrupted energy system with a market that allows consumers to benefit fully from the price reduction that these technologies will deliver. A cap that saves consumers £100 or £200 is very welcome, so I support the Bill wholeheartedly, but not at the expense of the much greater savings that await consumers with the green, clean energy system of tomorrow.
concerned about a long-tailed digital divide lasting decades, a point lost on many Conservative Members—as cheaper—fixed-term tariffs may be withdrawn from the market, an effect which was observed following the introduction of the prepayment meter cap in April last year.

In 2016, 4.4 million customers paid for electricity using a prepayment meter, which is 16% of all electricity customers, and 3.5 million prepaid for their gas, which is 15% of gas customers. That marked a slight reduction in the number of customers on such meters after a long-term increase. Customers on PPMs cannot easily switch to credit meters, which would give them access to a wider range of market tariffs, including the cheapest. In 2016, just 4% of PPM consumers changed to credit meters. That is an increase on previous years, but there continues to be a substantial number of cases in which the supplier refuses to let the customer switch or sets a condition, such as a credit check or security deposit, that the consumer does not meet; I have experienced that in the past. In 2016, 14% of electricity customers and 18% of gas customers who requested a change to a credit meter were prevented from doing so. Indebted PPM customers—about 10% of all PPM consumers—generally cannot switch to a credit meter, but those with a debt below £500 have the right to change supplier, which gives access to cheaper PPM tariffs. The number of successful switches by indebted PPM customers remains low at fewer than 3,000 in 2016, which is just 5% of the consumers who applied to switch supplier, but that has risen following an increase in the debt threshold for customers to be eligible. And I have to say that much of that debt has been caused by Government welfare policies.

Concerns about competition led the CMA to introduce a transitional safeguard tariff for PPM customers, which was introduced last April and is administered by Ofgem, so we have a model for the cap. As a result, the average price fell by around £60 for a typical dual-fuel PPM consumer. That is great, but it is nowhere near the level that PPM customers need to reach to be anywhere near where credit customers are. The cheapest available prepayment tariffs remain consistently more expensive than the cheapest tariffs available to those using direct debit, and that is a scandal. The growth of smart meters should increase tariff choice for prepayment meter customers by lowering the technical and structural barriers to competition. By the end of 2016, prepayment meter customers were slightly more likely than other customers to have smart meters—14% of electricity prepayment meters and 16% of gas prepayment meters were smart—but that indicates how long it will take us to move to smart technology, which many Conservative Members are ignoring.

I am concerned that standard variable tariff customers will have the same experience as people on prepayment meters, and also that the energy companies, particularly the big six, will try to force people on standard variable tariffs to go on to prepayment meters. The Government need to be mindful of that during the passage of this Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and others have referred to municipal energy companies and co-ops. Robin Hood Energy has been mentioned, and White Rose Energy has been started by my local authority in Leeds—I declare an interest both as a customer and having been the deputy executive member for climate change and sustainability when White Rose Energy was launched.

Both White Rose Energy and Robin Hood Energy have worked to take people off prepayment meters and to ensure that customers are on the best possible tariff—I looked at my bill this morning, and it told me that I am on the best possible tariff for both electricity and gas. That is a model of great practice implemented by a great local authority in Leeds.

I am concerned that the Bill does not provide an effective and holistic solution to the problems facing people on standard variable tariffs. Utilising technology to ensure faster switching, and utilising mechanisms to ensure more people move off prepayment and to ensure greater market choice should all be central to the Bill, rather than just the sticking plaster of a temporary cap that may penalise some customers. Before Third Reading, I hope the Minister will investigate the effect of the unintended and potentially perverse consequences of the Bill as it stands.

4.51 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). Unlike him, I do remember the time before privatisation took place in the 1980s and 1990s. It is worth remembering some of the objectives of the privatisation led by the then Conservative Government.

The first objective was to spread ownership, which has happened—ownership is much more diverse now. It is a little concerning when we hear Labour Members oppose private investment in our utilities and infrastructure, from wherever it may come. A serious message is coming from the Opposition, one that they need to think long and hard about before it goes out more broadly to overseas investors who want to come and invest here in the UK.

Caroline Flint: Would the hon. Gentleman be surprised to learn that it was only in 1998 that people were first able to change their electricity supplier?

Mark Pawsey: That is a concern, but let us not forget who owned these businesses at the time. In many instances, shares in the utilities were bought by the customers, some of whom have since disposed of their shares—some utilities have been acquired by larger corporations. I agree that the ability to change supplier is important.

The other reason for privatisation was to make the industry more efficient. There is no question but that that happened in the immediate aftermath of privatisation. There were dramatic falls in price. I accept that there has been some consolidation, and it is now important that there is some intervention.

I am a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, which has taken evidence on this subject. I am probably the most sceptical member of the Committee, and I needed some persuading of the merits of the Bill. I accept that the market could work better, and other interventions could be made to improve it. I have concerns about the long-term consequences of the cap, and I know the Minister will address some of those concerns in her summing up.

The Select Committee has drawn attention to two key issues: the lack of activity by the regulator in holding the big six—the legacy companies of those that were privatised—to account; and, more importantly, the “feeble” response of the big six to the threat of a cap. It may be
that the industry did not take the Government’s remarks to heart and that it thought it would get away with it. It is a shame that this legislation has had to be introduced.

As for the market, all customers receive the same product and it is therefore entirely wrong that so many of the big six have a large proportion of their customers on standard variable tariffs—the most expensive rates. I understand that 57% of big six customers are on those tariffs. Of course, it is wrong that those companies should use the high standard variable tariff price to subsidise low prices to attract new customers—we hear of a £300 difference—and in that respect the energy companies have not done the right thing in recent years. One thing they could have done easily was change the description of a ‘standard variable tariff’ to an ‘emergency rate tariff’, so that consumers were clear that they were on a default rate and that a better rate would be available to them if they were to change tariff. It is wrong that the big six have taken advantage of inertia in that way.

The other innovation that could have been introduced, at the instigation of the regulator, would have been to have fixed-term contracts for the supply of energy, in the same way as people have a fixed 12-month period for their insurance, be it for their home or their motor. If people receive a renewal that is significantly different from the price they have been paying, that in itself is a trigger to shop around. It is a great shame the regulator has not identified and done this, and instead has been far too slow and too reluctant to use the powers it has had.

Switching rates are a useful measure of the effectiveness of the market, and it is great that more and more people are switching. We hear that about 20% switched in the past year. The rate is increasing, but I accept the point that the Minister will make that the figures we see are affected by super switchers. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), who sounds as though he is a super switcher, these people are changing very regularly. We do not need huge numbers of super switchers; we need people to look at their tariff, understand their bill, and change when they see themselves at a disadvantage.

I also hope the Minister will address the issue of the detriment that the CMA found—the £1.4 billion. We are looking at a transfer of that sum from companies to consumers, in many cases rectifying the wrongs done to those on standard variable tariffs. One concern is that that detriment exceeds the profits of the energy companies, so the question we might want to ask is: where is that money going to come from? I hope that the action of Government will drive efficiencies, but are those going to be able to be generated sufficiently quickly?

Alternative measures could have been implemented, and one of the first things I would have liked to have seen the Government consider is extending the existing protections for vulnerable customers. We have had protection for those on prepayment meters for some time, and that has been extended to those on the warm home discount. It should not have been difficult to look at Department for Work and Pensions data in order to identify other people who we might consider as being vulnerable and extend those existing protections to them. I am disappointed that we have not looked at doing that.

I am also disappointed that we did not look at more effectively turbo-charging the marketing programme to encourage people to change their supplier or tariff. Some 5.5 million people switched in 2017. If more people exercised the power to which the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) just referred—the ability to switch—this legislation would not be necessary.

The third issue I wish to raise is that of smart meters, which will empower consumers. It is a great shame that we have not managed that process more successfully and we have not got SMETS2 meters out into the market more quickly, so that people are also provided with the tools to be able to change their supplier swiftly and easily. It is important that the Bill is a short-term measure. It is vital that the sunset clause is in place, and I know that the Minister will be keen to state why that is there. Like other Members, I hope she will address how we are going to identify whether the market is working sufficiently well to make the second term unnecessary. I hope that it will not be necessary and that the action the Government are taking now will cause the energy companies to address the issues and deal with standard variable tariffs.

I wish quickly to address one concern about the possible consequences of the price cap. I am worried that we will see the same as what happened with tuition fees, with suppliers congregating around the cap and there being less incentive for people to change. I am worried that in the short term some of the work we have done to encourage people to switch will be lost as things stabilise. As I have mentioned, I am also worried about the difficulty of removing the cap, and, as I said in my intervention on the Secretary of State, I am concerned about how we can set it at the right level.

As other Members have said, there is currently lots of change in energy generation. I hope that the dynamic nature of the market in generation can be replicated in the market in supply, and that the temporary measure in the Bill will be exactly that so that we can return to an effective, competitive market as quickly as possible.

5.1 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I have long expressed concern and alarm at the way the energy market simply does not seem to work for consumers. I have worked with Members from other parties, most notably the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), to try to ensure action is taken on this issue.

The fact that the Bill will impose a cap on the price of the standard variable and default tariffs, at least until 2020 and possibly longer, is good news for consumer, particularly those who do not switch for a whole variety of reasons. The Competition and Markets Authority’s investigations found

“a lack of engagement in the markets on the part of many customers, which suppliers are able to exploit by charging high prices.”

Indeed, some 34% of domestic energy customers had never considered switching supplier, with 56% saying that they did not know whether it was possible or did not know whether they had done so in the past.

As we have heard, consumers on standard variable tariffs are much more likely to be older, disabled, on low incomes, living in rented accommodation or without internet access. Those on standard variable tariffs have not seen their bills fall by much when the cost of
providing energy has fallen. Such savings as are available are passed on only to consumers who were active switchers, as we have heard. We have to understand that not all consumers can engage in the switching process, so suppliers clearly need to do more to ensure that customers are not trapped in poor deals. The poorer someone is, the more likely they are to be on the more expensive standard variable tariff, subsidising cheaper electricity deals for the better-off. That cannot be right, and is essentially what has brought us to this point.

People in my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran are overpaying on energy bills by £5.5 million a year. That illustrates the need for action in the market, but that action is much more urgent than the mooted timetable of winter 2018 would suggest. I absolutely welcome the cap, but I am extremely disappointed that Ofgem has said it will need five months to implement it. We have been told that the cap will be in place for winter 2018, but why not sooner? I am afraid that the perception again raises its head that Ofgem is dragging its feet.

The Bill is indeed welcome, but the focus hereafter must be on fixing this broken market. We must have easier and faster ways to switch suppliers, for those who can and do; we need more transparent energy bills for consumers; and we need to create the conditions for a much more competitive market. Some people propose that we should consider scrapping standard variable tariffs altogether and prohibiting all tariffs without an end date, as they inhibit consumer engagement, but that prompts the question what energy suppliers can and will do to increase consumer engagement, because the figures for switching and the CMA investigations have shown that consumer engagement is severely lacking, for a whole variety of reasons.

Is it not interesting that, since there has been political focus on this matter, with a commitment from all parties to tackle the standard variable tariff rip-off, we now see some energy companies withdrawing this tariff, or seeking to introduce new measures to prevent customers from languishing on it? That shows that, so far, there has been a lack of will to deal with this issue on the part of the bigger companies in particular. However, it is clear that political focus in itself can help to drive change.

I echo the view that was expressed earlier: we must take care that the action taken in this Bill, welcome as it is, does not lead to higher prices in the longer term. We cannot have a situation in which energy providers offset initial price reductions with increases once the cap is removed. We also need to ensure that consumers who are on a cap default tariff do not lose out as market conditions change in the future. When the cap is lifted, we need to ensure that we know what the conditions and criteria for doing so are and that, in the end, we are left with a more competitive and fairer market for consumers. We need to know what the impact of this cap is and to ensure that there will be no adverse impact on a competitive market.

What is done by the Government and the regulator for the period during which this cap is in place really matters. I am keen to hear the Minister’s thoughts on this, as we cannot begin too early to prepare for what comes after this cap—whenever it is lifted. We need to know how we can continue to protect consumers and ensure that they have energy deals that are right for them and that they are not ripped off as they have been. We cannot go back to business as usual after the cap is removed. We need real and lasting change, and this period when the cap is in place is an opportunity to make that change happen.

5.6 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). I agree with many of her comments.

It is quite clear that gas prices fell in the period between the early 1990s and 2001, and bills were down by about £102, but they rose in the period from 2001 to 2015 by about £408. Electricity prices rose 44% between 2003 and 2007. Although I agree that we need to take action, I argue that it is this Government who are acting when the previous Government failed to do so. Why do we have to act? As my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) pointed out, it is because of predatory pricing by the big six companies.

Caroline Flint: I accept that we are talking about decades—I do not think that the market we ended up with was one that Margaret Thatcher thought that she was creating. The truth is that it was only after 2010 that we had any transparency and could access the data to tell us what was going on with these prices and why the mark-ups were so high. That is an important lesson from all this: transparency in this market is absolutely key.

Antoinette Sandbach: I agree that transparency is key, but I do not think that the price rises would have been hidden in the period between 2003 and 2007. Ordinary consumers would have seen—as we all did—what was happening in their bills at that time. I also agree that evidence-based policy making is the best way forward.

In instituting the CMA review, David Cameron was not kicking the matter into the long grass; he was getting the evidence that proved that consumers have had a detriment of £1.4 billion. This is the action that is coming out of that inquiry, which reported in 2016. It is right that we are taking action. Which? shows that energy prices topped the list of consumer worries—64% of consumers were worried about their energy prices. I find it puzzling that switching rates are so low—only 18%—given the way that consumers worry about their bills.

On the Select Committee, it was very shocking to hear the high numbers of people on the standard variable tariffs. Some companies had more than 80% of their customers on standard variable tariffs, which is simply unacceptable. It is that predatory pricing by companies where they are using those so-called sticky customers on the higher rates to offer switching rates that new entrants to the market cannot compete with and are therefore squeezed out. The Bill will address that practice, and I welcome that.

There is another area where we need to act. I follow on from the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran in saying that switching is biased towards the A, B and C1 social groupings. Some 29% of those earning over £16,000 have never switched, but this figure rises to 39% among those who earn less than £16,000. As others have said, if people are not switching, they are not able to access the best deals. This cap is needed to protect those on the lowest incomes, but we must also encourage people in those groups to take advantage of the market. They can do so through Citizens Advice. Many libraries
have computers that people can use to look up deals on the internet. It is important that, as well as the cap, the Government look at how they can reach out to the more disadvantaged social groups—groups D and E—that have never switched and at how they can take advantage of the market.

Caroline Flint: The hon. Lady is making an important point. Does she agree that it worth looking at how we could regulate independent brokers who could switch customers—on the customers’ behalf and under their authorisation—to the best deals? That might help these customers, and it could apply not only to energy, but to broadband, mobiles and insurance.

Antoinette Sandbach: We are already seeing those kinds of mechanisms with MoneySuperMarket.com and other organisations. However, some are incentivised, getting payments for switching. The Government have given Citizens Advice £100,000 to provide transparency regarding the rates offered and to help those who come to it with debt problems or other problems to switch.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I am cautious not to make too many interventions because Members are making great speeches, but I am worried that there will be so many questions that I will not have time to respond to them all at the end. I just want to reassure the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach). The midata trial is really important, as it enables people to allow their data to be ported to a third-party website that will then automatically come up with the best deals for them. Ofgem is working on that tool and it should open the way to much more innovative third-party switching services, which we all desperately need.

Antoinette Sandbach: We have seen that the cap works for the vulnerable customers who have had their energy prices capped. Although some have gone on to less advantageous tariffs, most have benefited, as shown in the evidence received by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. I agree with others that smart meters will revolutionise how we deal with not only energy, but perhaps other services. The cap is a temporary measure and is only needed as one. I add my voice to the others who called on the Government to ensure that loopholes on green tariffs are not used to game the legislation. The Bill has expanded the exemptions to include the safeguard tariff and those explicitly chosen by consumers, and the Government have strengthened the language relating to green tariffs.

I, too, call on Ofgem to act. I am afraid that I do not take the view that we needed this legislation. I would argue that Ofgem had the right to protect consumers without it, but I welcome the fact that the Government are acting to ensure that we address the clear problems in the market, particularly predatory pricing. This is about getting access to tariffs and the switching mechanism for those who need it. We should encourage those people and reach out to them, whether through Citizens Advice or how they sign on for their benefits. We clearly need to enable data sharing, so that energy companies can quickly identify vulnerable customers.

Patricia Gibson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Antoinette Sandbach: I must sit down soon; I have taken many interventions.

We must make data far more available to allow more competition in the market. That is where the Government’s policy differs from that of the Labour party.

5.14 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow my Select Committee colleague, the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), who made a number of important points, not least about reaching out to those who are not in the AB group. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) covered many of the aspects of the Bill in detail. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) also picked up on many of the issues.

One of the great pleasures of such a debate is that there is great consensus around the Chamber, but when we speak late in the debate, we find ourselves saying, “There are some things I want to repeat.” I will try to avoid that, because while welcoming the proposals, I want to highlight how much more there is to do to protect people with regard to energy costs.

I speak as a member of the BEIS Committee, and it was very clear to us that there are significant failings in the consumer energy sector and that intervention is needed, as consumers continue to get a raw deal. The alternative proposals from the consumer energy players were quite simply too little, too late, and it has become necessary to take action. Ofgem and the energy companies should not continue to make the same mistake on issues affecting consumers.

One of those issues is particularly important to constituents in the highlands and islands—distribution charges. In the highlands and islands, consumers pay 4p per unit more on restricted meters, so the average consumer is about £400 worse off. The need for the price cap, as with distribution charges, highlights the failure of the big energy companies to take positive action to protect vulnerable customers in constituencies in the highlands and islands and in other rural constituencies. The costs for people there are already higher. Many are off the gas grid. Many have to use much more electricity. The weather is colder. Income is often lower. There is a continuing, deepening crisis of fuel poverty, putting a weight on the backs of those already suffering straightforward poverty, especially those having to claim universal credit. We have seen some of the most severe cold weather in the past week. Who suffers more when it is cold? The poor, the vulnerable and the disabled. Although the cap is welcome, it is not a panacea, and much, much more needs to be done.

Antoinette Sandbach rose—

Drew Hendry: I am happy to give way.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am very grateful—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Can I just help a little bit? We have asked Members if they can do up to eight minutes, and some people are stretching
that, but the hon. Lady has just spoken and is intervening again. I know it is part of the debate, but I want to make sure that those wanting to speak at the end have not been sitting here for no reason.

Antoinette Sandbach: I will keep it brief, Mr Deputy Speaker. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that energy efficiency measures are key in this regard?

Drew Hendry: Yes, absolutely. There needs to be an acceptance that this is just one measure and there are many more measures—including on energy efficiency, which should have had much more attention from the Government.

There remains a need to remove legislative obstacles to data sharing for vulnerable customers to give them better consumer protection. There also remains—

Patricia Gibson: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Drew Hendry: Yes.

Patricia Gibson: I will make a very brief intervention if I may, Mr Deputy Speaker. As I said in my speech, we are having this debate because of the loyalty penalty that people pay. We see this in the energy industry, the insurance industry and a whole range of industries. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need more Government regulation across industries to stop people being punished for being loyal to their providers, whatever the market?

Drew Hendry: I absolutely agree. To assist, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take no more interventions during the rest of this speech.

As I said, we need data sharing for vulnerable customers to give them better protection. There remains a risk, as was highlighted by the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), who is still in the Chamber, that suppliers may just increase their lowest prices to maintain profit. We will all be watching carefully to see how they react.

So what must now be done? In Scotland, the SNP Government are providing resources for financial health check-ups to help pensioners and those on low incomes to make the most of their money and to secure the best energy tariffs. The UK Government will, I hope, follow suit.

We call on the Government to place a new duty on energy companies to set out a clear timetable for reducing the number of people on prepayment meters, to implement the Competition and Markets Authority’s call to reduce the costs for households and to introduce a requirement for energy companies to prioritise the roll-out of new-generation smart meters to households at risk of fuel poverty. That can all be done in short measure.

When it comes to disabled people, even more action is needed. Disabled people face higher energy costs because of issues related to their impairment or condition. Those extra costs have a detrimental impact on disabled people’s financial resilience and ability to fully participate in society. The price cap goes some way, but the UK Government must now put in place longer term plans alongside the price cap to improve support for disabled consumers, including increasing accessible communication and digital inclusion and, as I mentioned earlier, building on more effective data use.

The challenges for disabled people are that they have no choice but to consume more. They have limited mobility, use more heating to stay warm and run additional technology and equipment. Over a quarter—27%—of households with a disabled person spend more than £1,500 a year on energy, and nearly 800,000 households across the nations of the UK spend more than £2,500.

There must be a different way to deal with this. In Scotland, the Scottish Government have announced a publicly owned energy company, supporting efforts to take fuel poverty and climate change targets seriously. We will provide people, particularly those on low incomes, with more choice and the option of a supplier whose only job is to secure the lowest price for consumers and who looks after the wellbeing of those who lack the confidence or ability to engage effectively in complex energy markets. That will also allow us to deliver on broader energy ambitions for renewable generation and the maximisation of community benefit. By the end of this parliamentary term, the conditions will be in place to meet the set-up challenges.

In welcoming the Bill, I once again stress that this action comes too late in the day for many. Progress on helping hard-pressed consumers must now be much more rapid and effective, especially for those who are hurting the most.

5.22 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am pleased to follow so many eloquent speakers, almost all of whom agree that this is a very sensible Bill.

I would like to begin with a question: can it be right that customers purchasing energy from the big six for some of the most basic things in life—simply keeping warm, making a cuppa, cooking the supper or running the washing machine—collectively paid some £1.4 billion more than they ought to have done between 2012 and 2015? In 2016, that figure escalated to almost £2 billion. As we have heard, that was the conclusion of the Competition and Markets Authority’s energy investigation. I am pleased to say that the Bill is intended to rectify that, which I am sure you will agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, is eminently sensible. Why? Because it is in the interests of fairness, of delivering for the customer and of giving better value to many people who quite frankly have been taken for a ride and have been paying over the odds for the self-same energy supply that others have got cheaper. In reality, they have been taken advantage of, as the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) said.

We would not think that it was possible, but how has it happened? What we might call “active customers” are on the ball and save money by switching continuously, according to the prices on offer. Those people can save up to £300 a year by hunting out the cheapest deals. However, as we have heard, not everybody does that. Indeed, five out of every six households did not switch energy supplier in nearly a year between October 2016 and September 2017. That adds up to a cool 11 million households, although I am pleased that 4 million vulnerable households have been helped with an absolute price cap on prepayment meter tariffs.

The people in these 11 million households are on standard variable tariffs. They do not chop and change, but stick with the initial supplier. How are they rewarded for their faithfulness? By paying over the odds by up to
£300 in a six-month period. That is itself a far from fair state of affairs, but it is even more scandalous that many of those staying on standard variable tariffs are those who can ill afford to do so. A high proportion of them are elderly. That is especially pertinent in a county such as mine, Somerset, where there is an ageing population. Between 1984 and 2014, the number of people aged 85 or more in Somerset increased by an incredible 170%, which is more than 18,000 people. The number of people aged 75 or more is projected to double in the next two decades, and the fastest-growing group is men aged 80 and over.

Those people should not be targeted and taken advantage of because they are not au fait with modern technologies such as surfing the internet to find cheaper energy deals. I am standing up for the elderly in particular—I run an older generation fair in Somerset, where I talk about such matters. Many of those staying on standard variable tariffs are elderly. That is especially pertinent in a county such as mine, Somerset, where there is an ageing population. I believe the Minister opened the event.

Yes—very good.

Claire Perry: Yes—very good.

It is right that we have the Bill, because the market has not worked.

I support and campaigned for an energy cap for many years. I am pleased that it will be introduced, and I will support the Bill tonight, but it would be wrong to say that it is a panacea: it is not. Many other pieces of work need to be done. I hope—I will work with the Government on this—that during the period of the price cap, we will look at other parts of the energy market, which the Prime Minister rightly described as "broken". People are getting ripped off by, for example, transmission and distribution costs, because we have private monopolies running those sections of the energy market. It is right that we have the Bill, because the market has not worked.

I want to say something contrary to some of my colleagues on the Committee who have blamed the regulator. I have been on the Committee for many years, since it was the Energy and Climate Change Committee, and the regulator has done some good work. The first thing it did, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) pointed out, was to ensure that consumers had greater transparency in their bills,
so that they could see the unit prices. Before, those prices were hidden and people did not really know what they were being charged. The energy companies blamed the fact that wholesale costs had gone up, so they had to put their prices up. There is a new regime in Ofgem that is doing more impressive work in looking after the most vulnerable. When the chief executive gave evidence to the Committee he had the honesty to apologise for not doing enough, and that was the right approach.

Successive Governments have not done enough either. We have a huge responsibility to look after the most vulnerable energy users. As individual Members we must scrutinise the Government, but they must do more. When I was on the Energy and Climate Change Committee between 2010 and 2015, I was fed up of Ofgem coming to one session and saying that it did not have enough powers, and the Government would not give it more powers, and then a Minister—they changed regularly—coming to another session and saying that the regulator had enough powers. It was a missed opportunity, and we are much better placed now.

We put too much emphasis on switching as a panacea. As other hon. Members have said, a low number of people switch. It is not an easy thing to do. People are very busy, and vulnerable people may have two or three jobs. The last thing that they want to do is spend hours and hours on the line to a call centre to switch. That approach did not work, for many good reasons. I remember the Secretary of State in the coalition Government—the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey)—saying that switching was the great answer. David Cameron, as Prime Minister, accepted that, and the issue was kicked into the long grass. I am glad that the market is actually working. There was a fear that the energy companies would go up to the highest rate, but that has not really happened. I am therefore pleased that we are better placed now. The role of the regulator is important, and it is now more proactive and helpful.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) was a member of the Committee that pushed for measures on prepaid meters, which were affecting the most vulnerable. The energy price cap for prepaid meters has worked in helping to reduce their energy costs. There was a fear that the energy companies and suppliers would go up to the highest rate, but that has not really happened. I am therefore pleased to support the cap in the Bill, and I am pleased that there is a sunset clause.

Changing the behaviour of energy companies is essential. In the past, they have been playing the system while blaming others. They have always said that transmission costs are too high and fixed, and that they are vulnerable to wholesale costs. We had a situation, particularly from 2008 to 2014, described as “rocket and feathers”: prices rocketed, but when the price of crude came down there was only a trickling down or “feathering” in the cost of people’s bills. That situation has been exposed through tariffs, which has been important.

Transmission and distribution costs account for as much as 25% of people’s bills. The distribution companies are private monopolies, as is National Grid for transmission. There is no competition in that part of the sector. When we talk about a broken sector and free markets, we must remember that in many areas the market is actually restricted to one company. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) rightly talked about the peripheral areas of the United Kingdom, many of which are off-grid, paying more for their energy. People who are off-grid do not have the option of dual fuel payments, so they are paying a lot for either off-mains gas or oil.

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about rural consumers who rely on off-grid gas and liquefied petroleum gas supplies. There have been inquiries into how that market functions. Is he satisfied that it is working fairly for rural consumers in Wales and the rest of the UK?

Albert Owen: No. I think more has to be done. I hope that the energy cap sunset clause will enable us, working with the Government and the regulator, to consider greater reform of the energy market so that we can prioritise helping isolated communities. I want to highlight the excellent work of Citizens Advice and many other groups. In my constituency and, I am sure, in the right hon. Gentleman’s, energy costs are a big issue in the citizens advice bureau’s casework, because of the price of oil in rural constituencies.

There is an answer to the monopoly status of the transmission and distribution companies: greater competition from not-for-profit organisations that reinvest in infrastructure. Welsh Water is a not-for-profit organisation. It has competition within it, because it puts its contracts out to tender. It is not a monolithic public monopoly, but a not-for-profit organisation that values its customers first and foremost. I know that the Minister will refer to the Government review of transmission costs. We have not had a response to that yet. I will support the Bill, because I have been campaigning for it for years. I do not think it is a panacea in itself, but together we can help vulnerable and non-vulnerable customers who have been ripped off for too many years.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There are 10 speakers left, so I suggest that they speak for six minutes each.

5.39 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It would be prudent at this time for me to thank the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee for its hard work and its contribution to the Bill. I wish to refer to what the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who is no longer in his place, said earlier about paying with meters. He appeared to think that they came along with privatisation, but I can go back to the 1950s and 1960s, when meters took a shilling, which is the equivalent of 5p today. Prepayment meters have been with us for quite some time.

When competition works, it delivers the best for consumers, shareholders and the Government alike, and over the past two decades, energy utilities have secured significant investment. It would be a mistake to damage the market that has evolved in recent decades or distort it unnecessarily by introducing state-owned or publicly owned suppliers. That would jeopardise public investment, cost the taxpayer significant sums and lead to the loss of corporate tax receipts. That approach would, in my view, be folly, given that this Conservative Government have already worked hard, and continue to do so, to ensure that the market is more competitive.
The number of energy suppliers has increased fourfold, from about 13 to 50, since 2010, giving the consumer a much wider range of options should they choose to take them. The advent of smart meters will in due course make energy bills more accurate and pricing more transparent, although I concede that there is some way to go to secure the installation of about 53 million such meters by 2020, which is an ambitious target. By working with Ofgem, which has rightly come in for some criticism this afternoon, and by harnessing the power of the internet, the Government will make it quicker and easier for consumers to switch suppliers, which should reduce their energy costs.

There is a large of group of over 5 million active consumers who are willing to use their options to secure the best deal, as was referred to earlier in the debate. Almost one in five United Kingdom households are switching supplier each and every year. The big six are having to work much harder and offer better deals to retain that group of important customers and to compete for their loyalty. However, there are people who, for whatever reason, still do not switch. The non-switchers, who include some of the least well off and the most vulnerable in society, remain for the most part a captive market for the large and dominant suppliers. A form of two-tier market has inadvertently emerged, and those households tend to be on high-cost tariffs.

Our aim as Conservatives must be to create a competitive market that is fair to consumers and to the suppliers, and in which the big six cannot rest on their laurels and prosper—and they have prospered—by inflicting higher charges on those who can least afford it. Encouraging switching does go some way towards achieving that, and we should certainly continue those efforts, but in the meantime we also need to protect the very large group of non-switchers.

The Conservative manifesto proposed the introduction of a safeguard tariff that would protect consumers on the poorest-value tariffs, and I am pleased to support this Bill, which honours that commitment. Indeed, I commend the Government for driving forward their promise reasonably fast. The non-switchers, who include some of the least well off and the most vulnerable, remain for the most part a captive market for the large and dominant suppliers. A form of two-tier market has inadvertently emerged, and those households tend to be on high-cost tariffs.

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Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant). I support the Bill, because the energy price cap will help to ensure that overcharging for energy use is brought under control, which will support some of the most vulnerable people in our society and in my constituency.

Allowing the independent regulator, Ofgem, to cap energy tariffs until 2020 will mean that an absolute cap can be set on poor-value tariffs. That will help to protect the 11 million households on low standard variable or default tariffs who are not protected by existing caps. As hon. Members have said, the difference between the cheapest tariff and the average standard variable tariff from a big six supplier is about £300 a year, and it has been at about that level for the past six months. That is an awful lot of money for constituents in some of the poorest parts of our region, as well as others in the UK. The Competition and Markets Authority’s recent investigation into the energy market found that the domestic customers of the big six energy suppliers pay on average £1.4 billion a year more than they would in a truly competitive market. I do not think that there is any argument in the House about the fact that the market is not truly competitive.

Although I believe that promoting competition is generally the most effective way to ensure that customers receive the best value in their service, I welcome the fact that the Government are prepared to act when it becomes apparent that markets are not working for consumers. As colleagues have said, the technological advances that will improve the market are not happening fast enough to support vulnerable people now.

The Government made a manifesto commitment to extend the price protection that is currently in place. I welcome Ofgem’s commitment to protect a further 1 million families from expensive standard variable tariffs for the first time, taking those protected to a total of more than 5 million people. Despite that, however, not all consumers on the most expensive tariffs are helped. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State suggested, it is not enough just to support people who have ticked the right boxes for vulnerability on paper. We must support all vulnerable people and others who are being overcharged to the detriment of their standard of living.

The Bill strikes the right balance by protecting those on standard tariffs while ensuring that energy customers who shop around and switch suppliers can find the best energy deals. I am confident that the Bill will also ensure that Ofgem can set a cap that will enable suppliers to compete effectively. It is obviously vital that that is set at the right level, and that the outcomes are measured and reviewed. There is an interesting discussion to be had about how that will work, which I shall come on to later.

It is right to highlight, as many colleagues have, that this is a cap, not a freeze. Companies will still be expected to compete below the cap to attract customers, just as they were before. Nobody will be prevented from
reducing their bills by switching supplier or changing tariff, and energy companies will still be able to pass savings on to consumers when possible. It is also important to acknowledge that the price cap is intended as a temporary measure while innovations such as smart meters and more reliable switching are fully rolled out. It is not always easy to switch. Even in my own house, my wife and I are trying to work out why the bills are so high—is it an appliance, are we doing too much washing, are we drinking too many cups of tea, or is it my tariff? That is not easy to work out without a smart meter, but my energy supplier will not give me one, so it all gets very complicated.

It is important that we take steps now until such services are available so that people can switch quickly and easily. There are provisions to ensure that the cap is set at a sensible level and reviewed regularly, and Ofgem will have to consult on how to calculate the level of the cap. The cap will also have the flexibility to go up and down depending on market conditions, and I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) that it should be a formula, not a number.

I support initiatives that help to encourage consumers to switch energy suppliers and, of course, I support a competitive energy market. The number of suppliers has increased from 13 to more than 60 since 2010, which can only be a good thing. My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) mentioned that there are over 60 suppliers in Nottinghamshire, which is a great local example of a new, competitive company delivering lower prices.

It is people who do not have the means to call around asking for different energy quotes or do not have access to the internet, including elderly people who perhaps do not feel confident using price comparison websites, who suffer the most under the current system, as well as families who have too much on ever to get around to switching. Ofgem’s recent survey found that vulnerable consumers were the most negatively affected by the market, and I am sure that no one in the House supports that situation.

The number of consumers switching energy suppliers continues to be notably low. It would be great if that was because everyone was happy with their bills, but I am not sure that any of us believes that that is the case. Citizens Advice assisted more than 74,000 people with issues related to fuel last year, which again shows that the market is not functioning as well as it should, and it is great news that that organisation has offered its support to the Bill.

The Bill has huge potential to benefit the most vulnerable customers. If it achieves Royal Assent by the summer, the cap can be in place by next winter, providing protection to the Bill's customers. If it achieves Royal Assent by the summer, the cap can be in place by next winter, providing protection to the Bill's customers.

It is people who do not have the means to call around asking for different energy quotes or do not have access to the internet, including elderly people who perhaps do not feel confident using price comparison websites, who suffer the most under the current system, as well as families who have too much on ever to get around to switching.

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Apt at doing so effectively. However, we are where we are. We have a market that is not working for some of the most vulnerable people whom we serve. I am a great believer in not making the best the enemy of the good. A price cap is what my constituents need and want, a price cap is what we promised to deliver, and a price cap is what I will vote for tonight.

5.53 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): As a number of Members have said, the issue of domestic gas and electricity supply is particularly pertinent following the recent extreme weather. The cost of that supply is always hugely important to our constituents, not least because when the mercury drops and blizzards swirl, it an absolutely necessary and unavoidable cost.

Like all other Members, I receive letters and surgery visits from people who struggle with their bills, struggle to understand the tariff choices available, or struggle with access to the internet and the comparison websites that might help them to reduce their domestic fuel bills. I recently hosted an energy-switching surgery with our local citizens advice bureau to help more people to switch to the best deal.

According to the latest figures available, the Office for National Statistics considered 12.3% of households in my constituency to be fuel-poor in 2015. Thankfully, that was a great deal less than the 23.3% of households who were fuel-poor in my constituency back in 2010, but there is clearly still more work to do. Similarly, while the Office for National Statistics reveals that the percentage of households in Great Britain with internet access has increased dramatically over the last decade—from 60% to 90%—there are still in Stoke-on-Trent, according to the city council's digital inclusion strategy, about 15,000 households without internet connection and 7,000 without a mobile phone. That matters, because one of the driving forces behind the need for the temporary tariff cap under the Bill is the reluctance of consumers to switch, or the inability to do so with ease and convenience. The Bill matters to Stoke-on-Trent's digital inclusion strategy because a temporary cap would give us the breathing space that we need to take the measures planned locally that will get the market for energy functioning more freely online than at present.

Great efforts have been made to ensure the domination of the market by Blair and Brown's big six does not mean that new entrants are perpetually crowded out. They demonstrated what Labour does in power: it quashes competition. It now wants to go further, as we have heard from the Leader of the Opposition, by nationalising the energy market at huge expense to taxpayers, eliminating all consumer choice that would allow people to shop around and get the best price. It is greatly to the credit of this Government and their coalition predecessors that the number of suppliers has increased from just 13 in 2010 to 60 now, and that the dual fuel market share of independent suppliers now runs at 22%.

The nudges towards greater competition are not working for everyone, however. The £1.5 billion premium—the difference between what people would be paying in a fully functioning market and what they actually pay—identified by the Competition and Markets Authority in 2016 is a shocking figure. Just as we are taking measures locally to improve consumer engagement in a competitive market—not least with the own free energy guide for constituents, which I recently published—it is right that the Government continue to roll out measures to increase competition in the breathing space that a temporary tariff cap can and will bring.

As a consumer, the rigmarole of changing an energy supplier involves psychological barriers that everyday retail markets—like going to the shops—do not share. The sclerotic consumer side of the energy market also effects psychological disinhibition on the producer side, by which I mean that energy suppliers feel able, and indeed entitled, to take their customers for granted. That point is well illustrated by the fact that even the House of Commons has a loyalty card for tea and coffee. Huge energy corporations with loyal customers have no excuse for treating loyalty with contempt.

My tests for this Bill are that it should motivate more consumers to be confident switchers, that it will require suppliers to provide the customer care that loyal customers would expect in a fully functioning market, and that it will spur the regulator into action as the consumers' champion. I am confident that it will.

I will be glad to receive assurances that the long-term ambition for energy policy is not just a reliance on short-term caps. The long-term interests of consumers are best served by the freest possible markets with the greatest possible competition. Looking to the future, there is great potential for new energy sources and new firms in the market. Indeed, even the House of Commons has a loyalty card for tea and coffee. Huge energy corporations with loyal customers have no excuse for treating loyalty with contempt.

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the crucial truth that many of our constituents feel strongly that their energy bills are not fair. From there, similar solutions were set out in the two largest parties’ manifestos. We had the report from the Competition and Markets Authority, the letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), which I supported very early, and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee’s report and pre-legislative scrutiny. Today we have seen an unusual cross-party consensus, echoed among Opposition Members by the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), and by all my colleagues on the Government side of the House. This has been a model of how to build support, not least because we all want to do something to help so many of our constituents.

Interestingly, the Bill does not target the most vulnerable, because broadly speaking they are already on fixed or prepayment tariffs, which are already capped. The Bill provides for a temporary, absolute cap for 20 months, starting in time for the winter of 2018-19—I know that provides for a temporary, absolute cap for 20 months, which is part of the huge west midlands energy region, which is part of the huge west midlands energy region, about 25,000 of my constituents are on standard variable tariffs, many of whom have been on them for many years, paying roughly £300 more a year than they need to. There are twice as many of our constituents on such tariffs as there are switchers.

I wish we had the data on standard variable tariffs. I believe that the Government’s statutory instrument will make the data available—I hope that the Minister can confirm this—so that we can see what the details actually are in our constituencies. My guess is that in Gloucester, which is part of the huge west midlands energy region, about 25,000 of my constituents are on standard variable tariffs. What we do know from the west midlands energy statistics is that 20% of electricity customers and 34% of gas customers are actually served by their legacy supplier, and have therefore been on a standard variable tariff for a very long time.

I also guess that many of our city’s hard-working residents—we have the fourth highest employment rate of any city in the country—who are on relatively modest salaries, with an average salary of around £25,000, do not have enough time to switch. The Bill will therefore have the greatest impact on hard-working families and individuals, and it will enable them to budget for their family’s biggest cost after council tax. It is to them that the Bill is effectively dedicated.

There is a bit of an urban myth among Opposition Members that nationalisation is the real answer, but that is simply not backed up by history. We know that when energy companies were owned by the state, there were twice as many power cuts as there are now, and we know that energy prices fell after privatisation, only to rise between 2000 and 2008—we know which party was in power then—due to lax control of the regulatory environment.

What is needed today is for the balance of interests between the Government, the regulator, energy companies and customers to work above all for customers—our constituents. The Bill sorts the one major issue for 11 million people—the standard variable tariff—for now, and allows the Government and the regulator to focus on how in the longer term we use innovation, better smart meters, better and easier ability to switch, and a greater use of renewables to ensure that the energy market works as best it can.

6.4 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Going through the briefings that I have received from various organisations representing both consumers and suppliers, it is quite clear that there is universal recognition of the problem that the Bill seeks to address: market failure. There is almost universal support for the Bill on those grounds, and for that reason I am also extremely supportive of it. However, as we have heard, it is important to say that this Bill is not a panacea for all our ills and that the hard work does not stop here.

Citizens Advice is supportive of the Bill and sees it as a vital first step towards ensuring that consumers on default tariffs are no longer ripped off. Scope highlights the fact that disabled customers face higher energy costs for reasons related to their impairments and conditions, and it is of the opinion that the Government should also put in place a long-term plan to address the barriers that disabled customers face. First Utility, a challenger supplier, is also supportive, but it highlights the need for serious consideration of the level at which the price cap is set, for a level playing field for all suppliers and for consumers to become more active players in the market instead of them sitting back and becoming more passive. uSwitch has concerns in principle and believes that any price regulation should be light touch and in place only for the minimum time necessary.

I sense that we are moving in the right direction, but I do have one concern nagging me at the back of my mind about the possible unintended consequences. I hope that the Minister will be able to address my worry about a negative knock-on impact on investment in the energy supply sector. While I recognise that there is a strong element of “They would say that, wouldn’t they?” I take note of the worry raised by both the CBI and Centrica that the CMA should consider appeals against Ofgem’s decisions, rather than them being pursued through the courts by way of a judicial review, as the Bill currently proposes.

A revolution is taking place in the energy supply sector as it is decarbonised and decentralised and as more renewables come on stream. That welcome process requires an enormous amount of investment, and the Treasury has identified over £250 billion of energy investments that will be made in the early 2020s. We need to ensure that that investment keeps taking place in the UK. Such investment is beginning to bring significant benefits to East Anglia and my Waveney constituency, with numerous projects planned in the southern North sea, including the opening up of marginal gas fields and decommissioning. In offshore wind, 11 wind farms are either operational, under construction or planned off the East Anglian coast, with a total capacity of 8.7 GW. As I chair the all-party parliamentary group on energy storage, I should also highlight the exciting opportunities emerging in that sector that will help to decarbonise not only the energy sector, but the transport sector, that will empower British households to become generators of their own electricity and that will help to make our industrial base more competitive as cheap renewables are more easily deployed.

Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill
We are on the cusp of an exciting future that could bring significant benefits to the UK and create thousands of jobs, often in parts of the country where regeneration is badly needed. That requires enormous investment and, up to now, Britain has been an attractive destination for such investment due to its straightforward regulatory framework and limited state intervention. Everyone knows where they stand, and it is vital that we do not lose that hard-earned reputation.

The appeals process needs to be carefully designed and implemented to allow for continued investment and consumer engagement. Proper appeals are important to ensure that regulatory decisions are well founded. The appeals processes in sector-specific regulated industries show that regulators make errors. Ofgem is a regulator with wide-ranging powers that can make decisions that have significant consequences both for consumers and for companies operating in energy markets. Robust checks and balances are needed to ensure that the regulatory decision-making process is both rigorous and careful.

In making decisions, investors are mindful of the overall integrity of the regulatory process, which includes a proper right of appeal. There is a worry—as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies), who is currently not in his place—that the Bill as drafted is damaging from that perspective. That said, I recognise and take on board the significant amount of work that the Select Committee carried out in its pre-legislative scrutiny. The research and evidence it received suggests that this is not a problem.

I have a slight nagging doubt about unintended consequences. I am mindful of an article in the Financial Times yesterday that painted a scenario of increasing investor uncertainty that, in turn, could lead to higher costs of capital and, ultimately, higher costs to British energy bill payers.

I would welcome from the Minister, either in her summing up or later in correspondence, an assurance that there has been due diligence and an impact assessment confirming that the Bill will not lead to a downturn in the investment that is currently being unleashed in the energy supply system and that is beginning to bring significant benefits to many parts of the UK.

6.11 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): For too long many of my constituents and people living across the UK have been trying to manage overpriced energy bills and have been punished for being loyal customers. In a poorly functioning energy market, all customers would switch between suppliers to get the best value tariff for energy. However, only a proportion of consumers have been doing that, so creating a two-tier, broken system. In fact, according to Ofgem, as of September 2017, 57% of customers with the 10 largest energy firms were on uncapped standard variable tariffs.

I make it clear that I believe in a free market, but I also believe in a free market that is fair—one where the consumer is king and has choice. Currently, loyal customers suffer as we have a two-tier, unfair, broken energy market. This Bill will enable a temporary intervention in the market and will support our manifesto commitment to extend price protection.

Currently, some 11 million households are unprotected and on poor-value standard variable tariffs. The rate of switching is not yet high enough to rectify that anytime soon, so loyal customers suffer. We effectively have a system in which switchers can save around £300 a year but customers of the big six who do not switch and who stay on default standard variable tariffs are overpaying each year. In fact, the Competition and Markets Authority has found that, between 2012 and 2015, customers of the big six collectively paid £1.4 billion a year more than they would have paid in a well-functioning market.

With other initiatives to drive down energy costs and usage, as well as to promote switching, it is easy to question why a cap is needed. Well, it is needed. Those measures will help, but they will all take time, hence the need for a temporary measure. Let us briefly look at the key initiatives.

First, the roll-out of smart meters alone is predicted to take £300 million off consumer energy bills by 2020, giving consumers the knowledge to make informed energy and supplier choices, but that roll-out will take time. In addition, ensuring that properties are energy efficient is also essential, and the energy company obligation “help to heat” scheme will upgrade around 1 million homes by 2020—it will still help only a fraction of the population. The warm home discount scheme provides 2 million low-income and vulnerable households with a £140 rebate each year, but that helps only that specific group. The uSwitch campaign has gained traction over years, and the Government are also working with Ofgem to make switching suppliers even quicker and easier. But the annual switching rate in September 2017 was only 18%, meaning that five out of six households do not switch energy supplier. The number of people actually switching increased by 30% for electricity and 24% for gas. So the proportion of people switching is still far too low but the rate at which switching is increasing is growing dramatically. That indicates that it will become more the norm, but that it will take time.

We can argue today that we need to take responsibility for our own actions and for switching, but we also need to encourage and enable people to do this, and protect the most vulnerable in society. Leaving the system broken and ripping off loyal customers is not the right thing to do. In addition, there is a lack of awareness that switching needs to be done regularly, because as a good-value contract ends, it usually defaults to a single variable tariff. Martin Lewis, founder of MoneySavingExpert.com, has said that we need to make up our minds up between regulating prices, or encouraging competition and switching. However, I do not believe the two are mutually exclusive in this scenario. The regulation is just a temporary fix while we encourage switching and work to reduce energy prices.

Martin Lewis and some others also argue that a narrower price differential will discourage switching. That has not happened in Northern Ireland, and it should incentivise companies to find more efficiencies and reduce prices for switching customers. In addition, Mr Lewis himself warns that the cap will only reduce some customer bills by about a third of what switching would do. That shows the incentive.

I am delighted that the Government have accepted the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee’s sensible recommendations on the six-month reviews and on the Bill requiring Ofgem to consult on exemptions.
from the price cap for green tariffs, including the power to exempt them. That will protect green energy providers and give consumer choice. I agree with the Committee that we must also strengthen the definition and checks to ensure that those that qualify as green are green and that this is not just used as a loophole. Good Energy, one of the leading green providers in the UK, is based in my constituency and has in the past expressed its concern to me that consumers select companies thinking they are green when they are actually only partially green. These companies can therefore afford to charge less, so we need to be careful about exemptions to the cap and ensure that the energy market is more transparent to give consumers informed choices. I look forward to hearing from the Minister on that.

In conclusion, I agree with the chief executive of Citizens Advice that this Bill is “a significant step towards an energy market that works for everyone”.

But it is important that this provision is seen not as a stand-alone measure but as a temporary solution that will encourage switching, work to inform consumers of their energy use and bring energy prices down via a number of incentives.

6.17 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I am very grateful to be called to say a few words in support of this useful piece of legislation, Mr Speaker. I was pleased to be asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) in the early autumn to sign a letter with him to Ministers and the Prime Minister calling for this legislation to be brought forward. So I join him and others this afternoon who have given a strong cross-party welcome to the fact that we are here today debating the Second Reading of this important Bill.

I believe in a successful, strong, profitable energy industry. We need a successful industry, given the asks we are making of these companies in terms of our wider energy objectives. We are asking these companies to invest in new capacity—in resilience—to make sure that our lights stay on and to give us security of supply. We are also asking them to invest in decarbonisation efforts and do the heavy lifting in creating a low-carbon economy. We want them to do this all the time, while giving consumers the lowest possible prices. There is a duty on Government and on regulators here. When any piece of this industry—any of the individual markets that go towards creating this strong and successful industry—is not working perfectly, there is a duty to step in. That lies, first, with the regulator, but when it is slow to act, the duty then falls to Government. That is the point we have reached with this legislation today.

It is estimated that 23,000 consumers in my constituency are overpaying on their energy bills, by an average of around £275 per year, so the Bill will be strongly welcomed in Preseli Pembrokeshire. In fact, south Wales is estimated to be among the regions of the UK with the largest numbers of consumers overpaying for their energy.

With respect to the comments made by the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), I wish to put on record that there is a group of energy consumers who will not be protected by the legislation: people who live in small, isolated rural communities and rely on off-grid liquefied petroleum gas or off-grid heating oil supplies. Over the years, concerns have been expressed repeatedly about how well the markets are functioning for those consumers. Those concerns perhaps go beyond the Bill’s immediate scope, but I urge the Minister to keep them on her radar and to ensure that those consumers get the full protection that they believe they should be entitled to.

I have some other concerns about the legislation. We are looking for a change in behaviour on the part of the supplying companies and on the part of consumers. Although the Bill is a necessary condition, it will not be the final answer to the challenges. We need energy companies to behave in a way that demonstrates that they really value their consumers. We have seen a lot of lazy, inefficient practices on the part of the big six and some excellent behaviours on the part of some of the emerging challenger companies. They have entered the market and had to scrap and fight for every single one of their customers, unlike the big six, which have largely inherited their customer load from the old nationalised system. The Bill will be a helpful stepping stone, but it will not be the final story in respect of prodding the big six to model some of the best behaviours we see in the industry.

In respect of consumers, we heard a great example earlier in the debate from my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), who described his own experience of being able to benefit from being a switching customer. As so many Members have pointed out, the truth is that a great many consumers just do not behave like that at all. I think the Bill will be a helpful stepping stone to encourage more switching in the marketplace, but a wider body of work needs to be done, particularly for the most vulnerable, the disabled and the people who perhaps are not readily using the internet for a lot of their day-to-day consumer needs. We need to get them better engaged, so I encourage Ministers to keep that on their horizons.

We need to consider the ongoing support for the vulnerable. I agree with Citizens Advice that, after the sunset clause has been reached and the cap has been and gone, and when hopefully we have seen some positive reforms in the marketplace, there will still be an ongoing need for measures to protect the most vulnerable energy consumers. I would welcome the Minister’s thoughts on that. I wish her well as she takes the Bill through Committee. She has a lot of support from all parts of the House, but this debate has shown clearly that Ministers will need to address a number of specific concerns.

6.22 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I rise to make a short contribution to the debate on this important Bill. I pay particular tribute to the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) and my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) for their persistence over time to get us to this point.

The Bill will make a real impact on the day-to-day lives of the people who elected me, which is why it matters very much to me and why I have been pleased to sit here listening to the debate for several hours. When it comes to such important issues, we are talking not about academic abstractions or economic theories, but about reducing the energy bills of my constituents. What really does matter to me, as it matters to them, so I support the Bill and wish to make a few comments on it.
The price cap in the Bill is not, as some might fear, a corruption of the free market, but a market intervention to protect consumers from the worst excesses of a market that is not working. On a related note, I shall quote the words of a very famous Scotsman, which I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, will recognise instantly: “People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices.”

I am not laying the charge of corruption against the big six, but their activities might be described as a contrivance to raise prices.

The price cap is a blunt object—

Mr Speaker: Order. I was rather hoping that the hon. Gentleman was going to furnish us with the page reference in “The Wealth of Nations”.

Stephen Kerr: I am unable to furnish you with the page number in “The Wealth of Nations”. Mr Speaker, but you are absolutely right that it is, of course, the famous Scotsman, Adam Smith, to whom I was referring. He was a great soul indeed.

The price cap can be a blunt object if it is left in place too long: it could cause stagnation; it could cause a reduction in competitiveness; and it could reduce the scope for investment in innovation in the sector. The effect of the price cap is not intended to result in that end; it is to lead to something far subtler. I am talking about a market intervention that is consumer-led and that is about empowering consumers. I am glad that the cap is time limited. It gives us time, as has been said by many Members in this debate, to fix the market, but what does the fix look like? My contention is that the Government, Ofgem and the industry must work harder to create this consumer-led marketplace. New technology is becoming available to empower consumers—to give them more control over their energy consumption and supply like never before. It gives consumers the data they need to optimise their energy consumption and to give them control over their energy costs.

The idea of this technology is the start of something that is unstoppable—I am talking about the idea of the smart home. In effect, what it does is give power to consumers, which ultimately is what this Bill is all about. The average household energy bill—if someone is on a standard variable tariff—is between £1,200 and £1,300 a year. It is incredible how little interest many consumers pay to that kind of expense going through their households. Part of the remedy to this disengagement, or lack of interest, must be to give consumers the confidence to feel empowered to deal with those costs. At the heart of all this is the smart meter. I do not have time in this debate to talk much about smart meters, but they can create data, display data and give uses to data that help consumers to optimise their energy bills.

We need to make it easier for people to switch. There is a great fog that comes over many people’s minds when they are given the opportunity to switch suppliers. If we can make it as easy to switch supplier as it is to open an app on a smartphone or press a button on a smart meter, the game is on. I remain convinced that this technology can fix the market in time—and “in time” is the key phrase. We need a real national effort to install smart meters in every property across the country. There is a Bill, which has gone through this place and is now in the other place, that is about smart meters. There are issues about smart meters that demand the urgent attention of anyone who has an interest in seeing this vital national infrastructure installed in this country. There are technical issues, but that is not what we are here to discuss.

What are we discussing? Why am I standing here in the first place? Frankly, it is because we have a broken market. I wish to apportion blame for that: I put the blame firmly at the door of the regulator, which has been around, in one form or another, since the 1980s. I firmly believe that the regulator already has the power to do what this Bill will give it the power to do, but it lacks the will to use that power.

As a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, I was astonished to hear the leadership of the regulator, who were in front of us, admit in effect that they had the power to set the tariff cap, but that they were too frightened of litigation from the companies that they were supposed to be there to regulate in the first place. As we say in Sterling, why have a dog and bark yourself? That seems an apt expression for a regulator that has failed to protect the free market and has allowed itself to be sucked into the game of special interests. It is almost protecting the very businesses that it was supposed to be there to regulate. It is now time to question Ofgem and its fitness for purpose. If the leadership of Ofgem will not take these powers that will inevitably pass through Parliament and become law and use them to protect the customer and to build and create a proper, free and competitive market in energy, that leadership will need to be changed. It is time that we were better served by that regulator.

The energy suppliers are benefiting from this lax regulatory regime. By creating a situation in which they charge rip-off prices for standard variable rates, the big six suppliers have broken the covenant that all companies have with their customers. They have lost the trust of the people. They may use the period of the tariff cap to restore and rebuild that trust by working to create this proper functioning marketplace.

Let us not forget what these companies have done. They have used profits from standard variable tariffs to subsidise their cheaper tariffs. Unengaged consumers have been punished harshly because of their loyalty, to the tune of at least £300 per household per year—much too high. According to the Competition and Markets Authority, the country has overpaid a total of £1.4 billion. Consumers have been ripped off for years at the hands of the companies that should have known better and at the mercy of a regulator that has proved ineffective. It is time for us to take action and to work pragmatically to solve this problem for our constituents. It is a time not for economic dogma or ideology, but for proper pragmatism. The Bill is a superb example of the pragmatism that this Government pursue, and I am proud to support it.

6.30 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for this opportunity to speak. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who made an excellent case and, as ever, argued with vim and vigour.
I welcome this important debate because it is the role of the Government to step in when markets do not work effectively. Although I am instinctively a small state Conservative, I know that it is important that the Government recognise when markets have not worked effectively and take appropriate action, as we propose in this legislation, which I support. The right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), who is not in her place, said that to expose market failure is not to try to weaken or be against all markets. That is a key point. Exposing market failure is vital for Government Members. Markets exist to improve people’s lives and make things more efficient. They provide outcomes and ensure that we can deliver things for consumers. If they are not working, it is important that those of us who stand up for free markets and capitalism point that out and take action accordingly.

I am instinctively cautious about caps, as are some of my friends, given their comments today. I support the statement of my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey), who said that he hoped that the cap was an incursion into this area, rather than a wholesale annexation. He expressed my view much more pithily that I can. I do, however, accept the need for temporary measures to find ways in which we can make the market more competitive, and my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) spoke so eloquently about that in his speech.

It seems that there are two issues: supporting vulnerable customers, and the general stickiness of a market that is lacking in energy, vigour and the ease to switch. I hope that we can continue to put in place more support, protection and cover for vulnerable people, as we look to make the market more competitive. However, we have to recognise that there is an element of agency. People have the right to make and not make decisions, and we have to find that balance carefully.

There are some signs of improvement in the market. There has been a large increase in switching over the past year or so. The market share of the big six has reduced from over 95% in 2012 to around 80%; it is just not happening quickly enough. There is no doubt, however, that the market is broken. There are too many people on standard variable tariffs who do not benefit from the other tariffs as they could do. The price differential of £300 between the highest and lowest tariffs—or between the highest average and other averages—is too high. There is a clear disconnect between wholesale prices and the retail prices that people pay.

There is a strong suspicion of tacit co-ordination between the big six. Anybody who looks at the graphs in some of the briefings that we have all received will see how the price movements of the big six over a decade have so closely mirrored one another. There are clearly high barriers to entry. There is a real stickiness of customer movement, as well as stubbornly high market shares, which happily are slowly starting to float down. There is a clear problem.

I welcome the opportunity, in the next few years, for this competition and change to take place. I hope that some of the things that are proposed on improving communication, getting better data and improving the switching process also take place. I accept the interim changes, but hope that we can reboot the industry over the next few years, so that we do not need a cap in future. I hope that we can ensure that there is a competitive and successful energy market that serves the needs of its customers, so that we do not have to do some of the other things that none of us wants to do.

6.34 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): This afternoon we have witnessed the House at its best. I think it is fair to say that we have had not a single stupid contribution to this debate. [HON. MEMBERS: “Yet!”] We are getting there. On the contrary, we have had a series of informed and thoughtful speeches, which, as the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) said, have been overwhelmingly supportive of the Bill.

I particularly emphasise the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who informed us that loyal customers are not rewarded but punished with high-price tariffs, and that energy companies have effectively brought this event on themselves with their discriminatory pricing—a theme that a number of hon. Members echoed. We heard a number of first-rate speeches by members of the BEIS Committee, which my hon. Friend chairs and of which the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) and the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) are all members. The quality of the Committee’s report is underlined by the quality of its members, who have so informed our debate. I congratulate the Committee on its report, which was really illuminating in the context of the Bill and what Committee members have said about their work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) pointed out that the price cap itself is not going to change the nature of the market, that other forms of ownership are available, and that a lot more has to be done on changing how the market works in the longer term. I salute my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) for her long campaigning on and intense interest in the price cap. In her view, we are at the end, not the beginning, of a long campaign to get action taken. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) reminded us particularly of the transition that we are making towards a locally disseminated energy economy and the importance of fair pricing to the longer-term issues. If I have missed out other hon. Members’ contributions, it is merely for the sake of time rather than a lack of estimation for what they have said. Overall, we have had a high-quality debate.

Because the contributions were as supportive of the Bill as they were, it would be particularly churlish of me to spoil the atmosphere by saying anything other than that we will not oppose the Second Reading of this Bill. We agree with the important points that have been made about the reasons for the cap, the consideration that has gone into it and what we need to reflect on with regard to its future.

Indeed, why should we oppose the Bill’s Second Reading? After all, if we look closely at the Labour party’s 2013 proposal for a price cap, we see an almost identical proposal: a temporary cap lasting a specified period and then the market’s understandable response of how the market was working. I am afraid to say that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley pointed out, when that cap was put forward in 2013,
it was roundly condemned by the Conservative party in trenchant terms. In that light, it is not surprising that the Government did nothing about a price cap for an extended period, during which action could have been taken to sort out energy market prices and create a fairer deal for customers—which, in the end, this is all about.

We have now had the Government’s conversion to the idea of a price cap. As Adam Smith famously said, I think in “The Wealth of Nations”:

“On the road from the City of Skepticism, I had to pass through the Valley of Ambiguity.”

I cannot give you a page reference for that, Mr Speaker, but that is what Adam Smith had to say about his route, and I think it rather sums up what the Government have gone through to get to this point.

A price cap was suggested in the last Conservative manifesto, then apparently reneged upon by the incoming Government, then rather weakly pushed away by the Department as the responsibility of Ofgem, then once again affirmed as a target idea at the last Conservative party conference, and then finally introduced as draft legislation. It is now being pursued in a hurry, in order to get the necessary legislation through in time for a cap to come into force by next winter.

That is quite a daunting timetable, but it is one for which we can have only limited sympathy, bearing in mind the time that the Government have wasted by opposition, then vacillation, then confusion and finally some degree of determination to introduce a price cap, which I applaud, and to do so in a way that is reasonably proofed against judicial review and other devices that displeased energy companies might decide to throw against it.

We have limited sympathy for the Government in the difficulty they have got themselves into with the timetable ahead, but I give a clear understanding that we will not oppose the Bill on Second Reading or be party to any slowing of the legislative timetable if it means a price cap is not in place before winter 2018. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) confirmed, we want to see that cap in place before winter 2018. Indeed, as my hon. Friend said, we know that 65% of customers simply do not and probably will not switch. They deserve better protection for their tariffs—particularly the large number who are on standard variable tariffs—than being told that they are somehow bad customers if they do not switch and that they have to put up with whatever comes their way if they stick with their energy companies.

We want to see better arrangements in the Bill for what comes next, after the cap has ended, when people will continue not to switch and will need continued protection for their position as customers. We were clear in 2015 and are clear today that a price cap should not just be introduced for, as it were, punishment purposes, and then when it is lifted business as usual carries on until someone else suggests that the market distortions and failures require another temporary cap.

Instead, the cap needs to function as a carapace under which work is undertaken to put in place checks and systems to ensure that these circumstances do not recur, that we subsequently have a supply market that is fair to the customer and the supplier at the same time and works well to ensure fair competition, and that customers of energy companies have reasonable and firm expectations of how their energy supply company should deal with them over and above the recourse of switching. We remain to be convinced that the Government really have a set of measures, prepared and ready for implementation as the cap progresses, to produce such a long-lasting result for energy markets, and we certainly intend to seek amendments to the Bill that will allow the process to happen better.

It is in that context that we want to cast the proposals we have heard about today from, among other Members, the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose). I commend him for his long battle to make sure that we now have a Bill before us. He has proposed a relative price cap, rather than the absolute price cap set out in the Bill. We do not support the introduction of a relative tariff range limiter as the instrument of a relative price cap. Among other reasons, it would not necessarily be a price cap at all.

However, such a cap would or could be an important device to ensure that customers who we hope will come off SVTs are not subject to equally disadvantageous practices in the long term through being placed initially on a low tariff, only to find themselves subsequently hoisted on to a very disadvantageous tariff, perhaps at levels similar to those of SVT customers, as soon as their initial contract has ended. Placing a piece of elastic between the best tariff and the highest tariff would substantially address such a practice, which is, as we know and have heard today, an area of bad behaviour by some energy companies now, and may well be in the future if we do not act to ensure that it does not happen.

At the beginning of my remarks, I gave the game away about whether we would support or oppose the Bill to provide some clarity of purpose about where the Bill should go not just tonight, but in its whole passage through the House. We already feel that we own the legislation, albeit in a form that has taken a mightily long time in arriving. We hope the Government will think carefully about our proposals to strengthen the Bill as it goes through Committee. If they want to introduce amendments that further reflect both these proposals and the commendable work of the BEIS Committee in carrying out pre-legislative scrutiny, I will not be precious about whose idea they were.
I want a legally watertight, effective price cap arrangement on our statute book as early as possible, with an equally effective regime in place to ensure that we will not be here doing the same thing in a few years’ time. If between all of us in this Chamber we can achieve such an outcome, I will be well satisfied with our endeavours as we start out on that road today.

6.47 pm

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I thank my opposite number, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), for his characteristically calm and sensible remarks. Indeed, it has been fantastic to listen to the calm and intelligent debate we have had today, with so many very well-considered views.

There is really strong consensus across the House both on the need for the Bill and, broadly, on the scope and structure of the proposed legislation. For that, I want to thank several groups of people. I thank my civil servants, who have done a good job in producing the current draft. I also very much thank the BEIS Committee, which is ably chaired by the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and has several extremely committed members from both sides of the House. Giving evidence to the Committee was a terrifying experience, but their scrutiny and suggestions, which we have fully incorporated into the Bill, prove the excellence of such a method of pre-legislative scrutiny.

I thank colleagues on the Conservative Benches and, indeed, on the other side of the House, who have helped us to improve the legislation prior to this point with their very considered suggestions. I thank in advance those Members who will serve on the Public Bill Committee and will contribute to our further debates, because we all want the cap to be in place well before the year-end, and it must have a smooth passage through the House of Commons to achieve that aim.

I need to single out two Members. The first is my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), whose campaigning championship in this regard has really electrified the parties on both sides of the House about the need to act. As we heard today, the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) has brought the best of her wisdom and experience to this debate. It was a pleasure to listen to both Members’ speeches.

I want very quickly to recap the purpose of the Bill and to refute the growing idea that we have in any way dragged our feet. I was struck by what my hon. Friend the Member for Edsdsbury (Antoinette Sandbach) said about how the best form of legislation is evidence-based. We have had the CMA review, and we have taken the time to consider the fact that freezes do not work terribly well, and to have the regulator bring forward reasonable and welcome improvements. For example, we saw only this week the ending of the back-billing problem whereby people could be back-billed over many months, ending up owing thousands of pounds. The regulator has got the message strongly.

The Bill is a time-limited, intelligent intervention that will help to accelerate the transition to a more competitive market. It will give more powers to the regulator, which is right. The market has changed significantly since the original days of liberalisation. We have some extremely empowered customers, and we also have a large pool of customers who are less engaged and have ended up on poor-value tariffs. The cap has to be set to maximise investment, competition, innovation, switching and improved efficiency, and it will be accompanied by a whole package of other measures—the so-called carapace that the hon. Member for Southampton, Test mentioned—such as smart meter roll-outs, same-day switching and so on.

The Bill will also be a doughty defence of consumer rights. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), my hon. Friends the Members for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), and the right hon. Member for Don Valley really stood up for their constituents and what the Bill will mean for them.

The Bill is not an attempt to extend political control over the industry. I champion the fact that since privatisation we have seen more than £80 billion invested in the industry, with power cuts halved and network costs down 17%. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) said, we need billions of pounds more of investment to drive forward an exciting low-carbon, distributed energy future. The last thing we would want to do is to scare off that level of investment.

I will say something gently to the Opposition, because they could not resist a poke, about the idea that their policy is for a cosy array of mutual companies. The shadow Chancellor has said, “We want to take these industries back.” We know what that means: borrowing billions of pounds, raising taxes for millions, and no investment of the further investment that we need. It would be entirely the wrong thing for the industry. The Bill is a clear signal that we believe in well-regulated competitive markets as the best way to deliver service and value for all customers, and that we will act on market failures to give regulators more power to improve market conditions.

Mark Menzies: I thank the Minister for the way in which she has engaged with me and other colleagues who had concerns about the Bill. She has made time to meet us, with her officials, and addressed many of the concerns that we have raised with her in private. I want to put my thanks on record.

Claire Perry: I thank my hon. Friend. I would also like to put on record my thanks to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), whom I omitted to thank as one of the original campaigners north of the border.

Eight main issues were raised that I want to address. The first, which was raised by many hon. Members, including the hon. Members for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), and my hon. Friend the Members for Mansfield and for Edsdsbury, was what will happen to vulnerable customers once all this has taken place. Of course, we have the safeguarding tariff that is now protecting 5 million people, saving them on average £120 compared with what they would have paid. That has been brought forward. We expect a whole package of additional improvements—smart metering, next-day switching, the midata project, the CMA policies about engagement with those disengaged customers, and an expectation that Ofgem will continue to scrutinise and actively monitor tariffs to make sure that any gaming creeping into the system is knocked on the head.
Many good comments were made about ensuring that the Bill will not disincentivise competition, including by my hon. Friends the Members for Wells, for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) and for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke). We know the level of investment that we have to maintain, which is why the Bill will introduce a time-limited, intelligent cap. The powers given to Ofgem have to ensure that we do not disincentivise competition, while ensuring that companies have an incentive to improve the efficiency of their operations. Too many companies are still stuck in the operational methods of the past and customers are paying the price for that.

Interesting points were raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Fylde (Mark Menzies) and for Waveney (Peter Aldous), and the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), about an appeal to the CMA, which is something for which the big six are lobbying. I firmly believe that given the level of transparency and scrutiny that will happen when setting the cap, there will be opportunities to ensure that that is robust. Ofgem’s decision on the cap can be judicially reviewed. Courts can consider these issues more quickly than the CMA, and a whole range of evidence can be taken in such a case, whereas with CMA decisions, the range of those who can comment is very restricted. I do not want anything that slows the introduction of the cap.

Albert Owen: I pay tribute to the Minister and the Secretary of State for honouring their commitment to take this measure through as speedily as possible. Will she look at other reviews? We await a Government response to the Dieter Helm review, which, by looking at transmission and distribution, could complement the price cap.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman anticipates a point I was going to make about many contributions about the calls for additional market reviews. The call for evidence on the excellent Helm review, which was commissioned by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, has only just closed, and I think we need to take the time to consider it. I was struck by the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin). What we want is a rational, functioning economic regulator in a market that is so vital in keeping the lights on, keeping investment going and keeping people warm in their homes, not a political rush to do things.

The right hon. Member for Don Valley raised the issue of green tariffs and gaming the system. Ofgem has never been required to scrutinise existing green tariffs. It will have to scrutinise carefully and consult during the process of the design of the cap to ensure that it is fit for purpose. As we heard from many Members, the expectation will be that customers should not have to overpay to be on a green tariff. We are now buying subsidy-free offshore wind and I opened the first subsidy-free solar farm only last year.

There were many questions about the structure of the cap, including whether it should be variable or fixed. My hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare has campaigned on this matter very strongly. I was again struck by what my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset said. The structure of the cap should be able to take into account changes in the wholesale system. Clause 6(1) states that the period of consideration has to be no greater than six months, but it is entirely within Ofgem’s powers to change the cap more frequently. Of course, as we know, standard variable tariffs are currently updated only one or two times a year. Companies buy forward and hedge their energy prices, so it is not usual for very strong changes in wholesale prices to be incorporated. We will get to see the structure of the cap and its sensitivity to those prices going forward.

There were concerns about ensuring we allow co-operative energy providers to be in the market. My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow, who is such a doughty consumer champion, made that point, as did the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and others. We already have co-operative energy structures—White Rose Energy, Robin Hood Energy and so on—and there is no barrier to those companies coming forward and delivering.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby asked about the removal of the cap. We will have a series of tests, and we have set out clearly in the Bill what those tests will be. Ultimately, we want loyal customers to be treated as well as, if not better than, new customers who are being attracted by cheaper deals. That will be the absolute test.

In conclusion, we know the Bill is necessary. We know we need to get it through Parliament. I have been really encouraged by the tone of the debate, with so many Members having really scrutinised the Bill and being absolutely determined to see it through. I am confident that we can pass this vital Bill and our constituents expect us to do so, as they do not want to be overpaying on their bills. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

DOMESTIC GAS AND ELECTRICITY (TARIFF CAP) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariiff Cap) Bill:

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

2. Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 15 March 2018.

3. The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

4. Proceedings on Consideration and proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

6. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

7. Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.
Maldives: Political Situation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Mr Speaker: I repeat what I say most days: if, unaccountably, there are hon. Members who do not wish to hear the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) orating in the Adjournment debate, perhaps they could leave the Chamber quickly and quietly, so that he can address an attentive gathering on the subject of the political situation in the Maldives.

7 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I am extremely grateful to have secured this Adjournment debate on the topical and important issue of the current political situation in the Maldives. On 1 February, the full bench of the Supreme Court in the Maldives ordered the retrial of cases against nine political leaders, including former President Mohamed Nasheed, labelling their trials politically influenced. The Supreme Court also ruled that 12 Opposition MPs, barred from Parliament by the Elections Commission, must be allowed to retake their seats, thus handing the opposition a majority in Parliament, which has the power to impeach the President.

The Maldives police service immediately announced that it would comply with the Supreme Court ruling. Over the next two days, President Yameen fired the police chief, fired his replacement, and installed a third police chief. On 5 February, President Yameen declared a 15-day state of emergency. Masked security officials broke through the doors of the Supreme Court and physically dragged the chief justice away and threw him in detention. Another Supreme Court justice was also detained and thrown in jail. Former President Gayoom, Yameen’s half-brother, was also detained.

The remaining three Supreme Court Judges then overruled the 1 February judgment, despite it being unconstitutional for a three-bench court to overturn the decision of the full bench. On 20 February, President Yameen petitioned parliament to extend the state of emergency by 30 days. However, the ruling party was unable to gain a quorum in Parliament. Just 40 MPs attended Parliament; a quorum demands 43, but President Yameen announced the state of emergency extension regardless. The prosecutor general has publicly declared the state of emergency extension to be unconstitutional.

Despite the state of emergency and a 10.30 pm curfew in Malé, daily anti-Government protests have spread across the Maldives and have now entered their fourth week. Riot police have severely beaten numerous protesters, hospitalising many. A total of 110 individuals have been arrested since the declaration of the state of emergency and 31 of these are being held without trial under state of emergency rules. There are growing divisions in the security services. Some 50 military and police officials are being detained either at their barracks incommunicado or in detention centres. Four Members of Parliament are currently in detention.

Why should any of this be of interest to the United Kingdom? I would like to make four points this evening: the first concerns radicalisation. President Yameen continues to collude with a network of radical Islamists in the Maldives who are suspected of carrying out 26 murders over the past few years.
The Maldives economy remains a tourism driven economy in that it contributes more than 25% of the country’s GDP. While the tourism sector supplies more than 70% of the foreign exchange earnings to the country, one third of the Government revenue is generated from this sector. Tourism is also known as the leading employment generator in the country. In 2016, tourism contributed 36.4% to the Government revenue. But as a result of the current situation, the Maldives is facing financial ruin, with the tourism industry estimated to be losing $20 million a day since the start of the state of emergency. If the trend continues, it will lead to unemployment and dissatisfaction—to my way of thinking both active recruiting sergeants for radicalisation. With our tourists spread out over 115 square miles in 105 resorts it is almost impossible to guarantee their safety.

My third point concerns the Commonwealth. After 30 years of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom’s rule, it was President Nasheed who introduced democracy into the Maldives. From 1982, it was a welcome member of the Commonwealth family. It was President Yameen who took the country out of the Commonwealth in 2016.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, and draw Members’ attention to my registered interests on the Maldives. Is the right hon. Gentleman going to draw some attention to the fact that the United Kingdom’s reach on the Maldives has declined somewhat because it has left the Commonwealth? What can we do to rebuild that relationship, working with the ambassador, who is based in Europe? What can we do to rebuild the relationship with the Government for the very reasons the right hon. Gentleman has outlined—to make the country more prosperous and, more importantly, to turn it away from what would be a terrible plight if his predictions came true?

Sir Hugo Swire: Indeed, and two of the neighbouring countries, Sri Lanka and India, are members of the Commonwealth. I will say later in my speech that, although I believe much needs to be done before the Maldives comes back into the Commonwealth, its proper place is back in the Commonwealth family.

President Yameen’s unconstitutional behaviour has seen him arrest three lawmakers and instigate a witch hunt of the families of his political opponents, including wives and children. President Maumoon and the justices at the supreme court have been charged with treason and bribery, and access to lawyers and family has been restricted, with reports of ill-treatment. Following the arrest of President Gayoom, all the leaders of the opposition political parties are under detention, or have been sentenced under similar trumped-up charges. The Government continue to defend their actions, claiming that state-of-emergency powers are applicable only to those who are believed to have planned or carried out illegal acts in conjunction with the 1 February Supreme Court ruling. That has led to increasingly politicised targeting of the opposition by security services.

President Gayoom’s daughter, Dunya, resigned last week as the state health Minister, and has herself now appealed for support from the international community. I hope very much that she will work with former President Nasheed and other members of the opposition, and that they will come together to chart a democratic future for the country—a future, hopefully, back in the Commonwealth family.
Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does he agree that a situation under the guise of a state of emergency in which judges are arrested, the normal business of courts is suspended, Members of Parliament are arrested and Parliament too is suspended makes a mockery of any notion of democracy, and, furthermore, constitutes an affront to human rights? Should not Members on both sides of the House of Commons condemn that action in the strongest possible terms?

Sir Hugo Swire: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Unfortunately, there can be no pretence that democracy is alive in the Maldives at the moment.

The Maldives Government also continue to condemn foreign criticism of their actions—no doubt they will now be criticising my right hon. Friend for his intervention—asking members of the international community not to chastise them publicly, and to visit the Maldives to assess the situation on the ground for themselves. However, when a delegation of EU Heads of Missions visited Malé, the Government refused to meet them. Similarly, members of a delegation from LAWASIA—the Law Association for Asia and the Pacific—were detained and deported on their arrival at the airport in Malé on Tuesday, 27 February, although they had informed relevant Government authorities in ample time of their intention to visit.

My fourth point concerns the possibility of regional conflict. In recent years, China has been sending more tourists to the islands and investing in the economy. In neighbouring Sri Lanka, we see China building a port at Hambantota, an 11,500-foot runway capable of taking an Airbus A380, and docks where oil tankers can refuel. That has caused understandable nervousness in India, and it is difficult to believe that the Indians will allow the Chinese to gain a similar foothold in the Maldives. It is also reported that the Japanese navy recently spotted a Maldivian-registered tanker, which allegedly is linked to President Yameen’s nephew, transferring suspected crude oil to a North Korean tanker, in violation of UN sanctions on the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. It would be interesting to hear the Minister’s response to that.

I have seen the statement put out by the European External Action Service on 6 February and the Foreign Secretary’s statement of 5 February, but will Her Majesty’s Government now go further, building on the calls made on the Government of the Maldives by the International Democrat Union on 21 February? Will they call for the release of, and access to lawyers for, all political prisoners? Will they lobby for a UN-backed mission, led by someone like Kofi Annan, to go to the Maldives without delay? Will they call for free and properly convened elections later this year, to be overseen by an international body? Will they provide support and assistance in the wholesale reform of judges and the judicial system? Will they work with other like-minded countries to counter Islamic radicalisation in the Maldives? Will they raise the issue of the Maldives at the forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting here in London in April? Will they ask the opposition parties to provide a list of resorts owned by President Yameen’s circle, so that they can be publicised and boycotted in the event of none of the above happening? At the same time, will they put plans in place to increase targeted sanctions against the Yameen regime if the Supreme Court ruling is not fully implemented?

As we exit the European Union, this is a good opportunity for the United Kingdom to show that we have our own foreign policy, and are working with like-minded friends.

7.15 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) for securing this debate. During his time as one of my predecessors in the office I currently hold, he was tireless in his efforts to improve the political and human rights situation for all the people of the Maldives. I pay great tribute to him for his continued commitment to this cause and share his disappointment and alarm at the recent deterioration in the political outlook in the Maldives. While I cannot promise that I will deliver on every last bit of the shopping list in his speech, I can rest assured that it provides not just food for thought, but an important pointer for the future, and we will look at all his proposals. I am also very grateful for the interest and shorter contributions of other Members, and I shall try to respond to a range of the points made during this debate.

Let me start by setting out the current situation in the Maldives, which is deeply concerning, and this Government’s response, before touching on the implications for visitors and the wider international context. For several years, particularly since 2015, President Yameen has been cracking down on the rights of political opponents, judicial institutions and the independent media, all in a bid to strengthen his own grip on power, despite growing popular discontent at his rule. Over the past year, the leaders of all Maldivian opposition parties have spent time either in jail or in exile. In July, President Yameen used the military to enforce a shutdown of Parliament to prevent the opposition from voting to impeach the Speaker, a close confidante of his. Parliament has in essence been ineffective in the Maldives since that time.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon pointed out, on 1 February this year the Supreme Court of the Maldives ruled that Parliament should release nine prominent opposition leaders from prison and reinstate the 12 MPs who had been stripped of their seats when they sought to leave the President’s party for the opposition. They included former President Nasheed, who is well known to several UK political figures, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith). He currently resides here in the UK in exile. His time in office was, to be honest, turbulent, but he did represent an era of significant steps forward towards a more open and democratic Maldives—a secular Maldives, which would have taken religious freedom seriously in the way the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) would wish all to experience.

However, just four days later, on 5 February, President Yameen declared a state of emergency in response to the Supreme Court decision. The effect of this is to suspend, among other things, the rights to privacy, freedom of assembly and silence following arrest, as well as protections from unlawful arrest. These measures were extended on 20 February for a further 30 days. In the weeks since the emergency was declared, the Maldivian Parliament has been closed down, two of five Supreme Court judges, including the chief justice, have been arrested, and opposition leaders are in exile and their families have been jailed and journalists and protesters have been pepper-sprayed and arrested.
Wider human rights concerns persist, including the Government’s highly regrettable and stated intention to resume executions under the death penalty. Freedom of speech is being persistently curtailed, and human rights defenders and independent journalists are being intimidated. A new anti-defamation Act is being used to attack independent media outlets, some of which have had temporarily to close out of fear for the safety of their employees.

This situation is entirely unacceptable. As for the state of emergency, let us make no bones about it: President Yameen has suspended the basic rights of his citizens because the Supreme Court ruled against him. It is an affront to any sense of democratic principles and the rule of law and a blatant power grab. It is entirely right that these actions have been condemned internationally. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has described the situation as an “all-out assault” on democracy, and the International Commission of Jurists has said that the Maldivian authorities “have not even come close to meeting the high threshold set by international law for the derogation of rights in times of genuine emergency”.

Those of us who follow media reporting will have seen speculation about how various regional powers might respond, particularly given that the Maldives is located close to the important shipping lanes that run from Malacca to Hormuz. The UK’s position on this is clear: the current situation in the Maldives is a political crisis that requires a political and diplomatic solution.

To address one of the points raised by my right hon. Friend, the Government are aware of reports about a Maldives-flagged vessel apparently engaging in ship-to-ship transfers with a DPRK vessel, in defiance of the UN Security Council sanction. We are also aware of the Maldives Government’s response that the ship does not belong to the Maldives. I think that it is only fair and right that we conduct further inquiries about this potentially serious case before coming to any judgment. Broadly speaking, I have to say that our response to the deteriorating situation over the past three years has been robust, as it will continue to be.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made a statement on 5 February, calling for President Yameen to end the state of emergency peacefully, restore suspended rights and permit the full, free and proper functioning of Parliament. I will meet the Maldivian ambassador later this week to seek his explanation of what his Government are doing in these areas. Our ambassador, James Dauris, who is based at our embassy in Colombo in Sri Lanka, flew to Malé on 5 February to raise our concerns directly with the Maldives Government and to meet opposition politicians and journalists.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for all that he does, which is deeply appreciated by everyone in the House—I mean that sincerely, because we all appreciate the influence he has around the world. When he meets the Maldivian ambassador, will he express the concerns that I and many other Members have, as was shown in last Thursday’s debate in Westminster Hall, about the persecution of Christians, who do not have an opportunity to worship their God in the way they want?

Mark Field: I will certainly do so. I have rather long list of things to raise with the ambassador, but I will do my level best to ensure that that issue is discussed.

The UK is also leading the international response, understandably. We helped to drive the EU Foreign Affairs Council conclusions on 26 February, which called for the state of emergency to be lifted. The Council announced that it would consider targeted measures if progress was not made. I also expect the UK to lead a statement of concern at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva later this week, as we did last June on behalf of more than 30 other countries.

On human rights more broadly, the Maldives has been one of the Foreign Office’s human rights priority countries for several years. We have regularly raised our concerns about human rights, in particular the threatened re-imposition of the death penalty, with my Maldivian counterparts, as have my Government colleagues. We will continue to fund projects that support efforts by Maldivian civil society to promote human rights, strengthen democratic institutions and advocate a greater role for women in public life.

We are deeply concerned by reports of increasing radicalisation in the Maldives and take them very seriously. We co-operate with the Government of the Maldives in the global fight against terrorism. Our view is that open and pluralistic societies are better placed to combat the underlying drivers of radicalisation.

My right hon. Friend was right to point out that the decision by the Maldives to leave the Commonwealth in 2016—an institution that was assisting it in addressing a number of these concerns—remains a source of deep sadness to us. We hope that in time the Maldives will return to the Commonwealth family by reapplying for membership, but clearly in its current state that cannot happen.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the safety of British visitors to the Maldives, and many of them are there as we speak. That is clearly an extremely important consideration for us. Nearly 100,000 British tourists visit the islands every year—not necessarily in the most built-up areas of Malé, but they are visitors none the less. He rightly pointed out that there are also significant numbers of Chinese and German tourists.

We regularly review Foreign Office travel advice to ensure that travellers have the latest information. We have updated it twice since 5 February, most recently on 21 February, following the extension of the state of emergency. Our current advice states that political unrest has to date largely been confined to the capital island Malé or to major population centres.

Sir Hugo Swire: I suspect that the majority of tourists do not go to Malé because it is only atoll in the entire Maldives that is dry. My point is that many atolls are many miles away from Malé and would be difficult to get to in a crisis. Further, the fighters who have gone to Syria and Iraq do come from the remote areas because, as I said, they have been radicalised through the mosques, the internet and social media. Just because tourists are not in Malé, which is the centre of unrest, that does not mean that there are no problems elsewhere.

Mark Field: My right hon. Friend makes a fair point. He can be assured that we will be asking our embassy and James Dauris, our excellent ambassador based in Colombo, to keep our advice under constant review.
Although few British tourists visit the major population centres, we advise those who do so that they should exercise caution and avoid any protests or rallies, but I will ensure that we give further thought along the lines of my right hon. Friend’s intervention. We have had no indication to date that any British tourists have been affected directly by the unrest or, indeed, that it has affected the resorts in which they stay or the functioning of Malé’s international airport. The safety of British nationals will always be our primary priority, and we shall continue to keep our travel advice under constant review.

The current situation in the Maldives is deeply worrying. President Yameen’s crackdown on media, judges and political opponents through the suspension of fundamental rights is unacceptable in any country that calls itself a democracy, and I shall make that argument when I see the Maldivian ambassador tomorrow at the Foreign Office. I know that he works closely with UK parliamentarians to promote his country in a positive light here in the UK, and I hope he will have heard many of the concerns that have been raised tonight, not least because they have been raised by parliamentarians who have the interests of the Maldives and its citizens close to their heart.

Colleagues will share my concerns at the sustained misuse of parliamentary process used to justify such measures. The members of the all-party British-Maldives parliamentary group, while understandably keen not to talk down the islands’ reputation, might usefully consider ways in which they could speaking out against the abuse. We shall continue to work, both bilaterally and with international partners, to urge President Yameen to end the state of emergency peacefully, to restore all articles of the constitution and to restore the proper functioning of Parliament, so that the people of Maldives can once more enjoy their full democratic rights and freedoms and live without fear or intimidation.

Question put and agreed to.

7.28 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Brexit: Devolution

1. Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Scottish Government on the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament upon the UK leaving the EU. [904136]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The Government have intensified their discussions with the Scottish and Welsh Governments on both the significant increase in powers that we expect to see for the Scottish and Welsh Governments as powers are returned from Brussels to the UK.

Chris Elmore: The Secretary of State and fellow Scottish Conservatives say that clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is deficient. He gave an undertaking to this House that he would table amendments, which he failed to do. He now says that he will deliver amendments in the other place, which he still has not done. Will he set out what happens if he runs out of time to deliver his much-promised amendments?

David Mundell: I am confident that we will be able to bring forward such amendments. We are in significant discussions with the Welsh Assembly Government and the Scottish Government, which both acknowledge that we have tabled them a significant proposal for changing the Bill. I hope to hear their detailed response to that tomorrow.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it is the Government’s wish that as powers are returned from Brussels to the UK they will be devolved, not only to Scotland but to Wales and Northern Ireland?

David Mundell: Yes, indeed; that is the Government’s wish, although we acknowledge that to make the common market within the UK function effectively, some powers and responsibilities will have to be conducted at a UK-wide level.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State set out for the House the mechanism he will use to amend clause 11 of the EU withdrawal Bill, should no agreement be in place by the time the Bill completes its passage in the other place?

David Mundell: I do not share the hon. Gentleman’s pessimism that there will not be agreement before the Bill completes its passage in the other place. I remain positive about being able to reach an agreement with both the Welsh and Scottish Governments. I believe that they are sincere in their expressed view that they wish to reach such an agreement, and we will take every step to ensure that we negotiate to a position at which we can reach an agreement.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Leaving the EU means taking back control of our waters, which is a huge opportunity for Scotland’s fishermen. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Scottish Government’s EU continuity Bill and stated position of remaining in the single market and customs union would simply sell out Scotland’s fishermen by handing all those new powers straight back to Brussels?

David Mundell: It is incredible that that is indeed the position of the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Government. Although at one point SNP Members came to this House and talked about a power grab, they are now willing and want to hand back powers over fishing to the EU right away and to go back into the common fisheries policy.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State explain why, if he believes that Brexit is going to have a profound effect on the devolution settlement, he was excluded from the recent meeting of his Cabinet colleagues at Chequers to formulate the UK’s Brexit strategy?

David Mundell: I know that the hon. Gentleman does not recognise the result of the 2014 referendum and therefore that the UK Government Cabinet is a Cabinet for the whole United Kingdom, as are all its sub-committees. The decisions on the Prime Minister’s approach to the EU negotiations were agreed by the whole Cabinet.

Mr Speaker: I call Lesley Laird.

Tommy Sheppard rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Was the hon. Gentleman planning to come in again? He has had one question.

Tommy Sheppard: I thought I had two.

Mr Speaker: There was no indication that the hon. Gentleman was seeking two. In an hour-long session, yes, but not otherwise. I do not know why the hon. Gentleman’s brow is furrowed; he has got what was his entitlement and has nothing about which to complain, so he can sit down and we are most grateful to him for doing so.

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): The Secretary of State stood at the Dispatch Box and promised the House that the devolution settlement would
be protected. Three months on, we are facing a constitutional crisis. What exactly is the Secretary of State doing to fix the mess he has made of the EU withdrawal Bill?

David Mundell: I will not take any lessons from the hon. Lady whose party was quite prepared to play the SNP game in the Scottish Parliament and vote for a piece of legislation that was quite clearly ruled as not competent by the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament.

Mr Speaker: Good communication is very important in these matters. My office was notified of the intention of the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) to ask a question, which he has asked. If he wants to ask a second, so be it, but he should not be flailing and gesticulating as though he has been the subject of some sort of adverse treatment, because he has not. If he wants to get up and blurt out a second question, he is most welcome to do so. Let’s hear from the fellow. Come on!

Tommy Sheppard: Thank you, Mr Speaker—I did want to ask the Secretary of State a second question. He has previously said that the most important thing about changes to the withdrawal Bill is that they should command the support of all sides. May I ask him: is that still his policy, and does he believe that any framework arrangements should require the consent of the Scottish Parliament if it changes its operations?

David Mundell: I have set out clearly that, in the process of leaving the EU, I want to ensure that the Scottish Parliament has more powers and responsibilities than it does today. I also want to ensure that we have an arrangement in place to allow us to agree frameworks as we move forward, and that frameworks, as I have previously said, should not be imposed.

Mr Speaker: These exchanges are far too slow. We need short questions and short answers. I want to make progress. Lesley Laird, a couple of brief inquiries, please.

Lesley Laird: My party is the party of devolution, and we will continue to protect that. We are 20 months on from the EU referendum, and a year away from leaving the EU, and yet Scotland’s invisible man in the Cabinet cannot even blag himself an invite to the awayday at Chequers to discuss Brexit. Does the Secretary of State have a plan to fix this mess, or will he continue to front up a Government who are trampling all over the devolution settlement in Scotland?

David Mundell: The Scottish Labour party will be judged on its actions, and I do not see it standing up for the devolution settlement in the Scottish Parliament. Instead, I see it kowtowing to the SNP. In relation to devolution and commitment to the United Kingdom, the hon. Lady, above all people, should know that we have a United Kingdom Cabinet, a United Kingdom Chancellor, and a United Kingdom Prime Minister. Again, she should not kowtow to SNP arguments about separatism—

Mr Speaker: We are most grateful. I call Tonia Antoniazzi.

RBS Branch Closures

2. Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): What discussions has he had with the Royal Bank of Scotland on the potential effect on local communities of the proposed closure of its branches in Scotland.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I have met senior RBS management in Scotland to discuss the decision. I made it clear that its plans were disappointing for customers and communities across Scotland, and I urged it to mitigate the impact of closures as comprehensively as possible.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Small businesses have already reported in Wales and across the United Kingdom that they are being refused if they try to pay in large sums of cash at the post office, as it presents a security risk and post office workers do not have the time to count such large sums of money. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that there is no disruption to small businesses or the public as a result of these ill-thought-out closures?

David Mundell: I certainly share the hon. Lady’s view that these are ill-thought-out closures, and I am very happy to take the specific point forward. I am sure that colleagues who serve on the Scottish Affairs Committee will also be prepared to put that view to the chief executive of the Royal Bank, who, I am pleased to say, has finally agreed to appear before that Committee.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The big issue for many rural communities, such as those in my constituency in the borders, will be the access to cash given that RBS is shutting so many branches on the back of previous bank closures. Can the Government do more to ensure that rural communities are getting access to the cash to support the local economies?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend raises a very good point. I would be very happy to meet him to discuss that issue further.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The decline in the centres of our Scottish towns is there to be seen. The closure of the branch of the Royal Bank will be a further nail in the coffin. What proposals does the Secretary of State have to try to arrest the decline of our vital little towns in Scotland?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman raises a very pertinent point; the vast majority of these proposed closures, for example, are related to rural communities. We must focus on ensuring that people in rural areas can continue to receive services. There is the issue of cash, which my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) has just raised, and also things such as broadband, which, as the hon. Gentleman knows, we want the Scottish Government to roll out more quickly.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It has been the custom since 2015 that the SNP lead spokesperson gets two questions at Scottish questions.
The Scottish Secretary is obviously very much aware of the Scottish Affairs Committee's ongoing inquiry into RBS closures. CEO Ross McEwan has now agreed to appear before the Committee. Bizarrely, the only people who will not go in front of the Committee are UK Government Treasury Ministers, even though they have a 70% share in our interest in that bank. Can he therefore join me in—

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me say to the hon. Gentleman that I need no advice on procedure from him or any of his colleagues. I work on the basis of that of which the office has been notified—one question, and that was why I granted it. I am well familiar with the precedents; I know what I am doing, but I do require effective communication, which was lacking in this case. It is not appropriate for the hon. Gentleman to use his position to try to score some procedural point, which he has spectacularly failed to do.

David Mundell: My Treasury colleagues will have heard the hon. Gentleman's comments.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): On 6 February, RBS announced that it would give 10 branches in Scotland a stay of execution, on the basis that they were the last bank in town. However, one branch, in the Secretary of State's constituency, was given a special reprieve but was not the last bank in town. Why should the Secretary of State's constituents be given preferential treatment while the last banks in some of the poorest communities across Scotland are closed down?

David Mundell: I know that this is a hostage to fortune, but I would like the hon. Gentleman to name that branch, because the three branches in my constituency that were to be the subject of this so-called reprieve—which I agree with him is just a stay of execution—are all the last bank in town. I think he should do his research a little better.

Referendum on Independence

3. David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on holding a further independence referendum. [904138]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Scotland held a referendum on Scottish independence in 2014—a “once in a generation” event, we were told—and the result was decisive. Now is not the time for a second independence referendum. Our entire focus should be on pulling together during negotiations with the European Union, making sure we get the best deal for the whole of the UK.

David T. C. Davies: I entirely agree, but if by some chance the Scottish Government do manage to have another referendum, on leaving the single market and the customs union which they share with the rest of the United Kingdom, will my right hon. Friend show it more respect than they are currently showing to the 17.6 million people across the UK who voted for Brexit?

David Mundell: Not surprisingly, I agree with my hon. Friend. He will be particularly aware that 1 million people in Scotland—most of them SNP voters—who voted to leave the EU have been airbrushed out of history; they do not exist. If one listens to the our First Minister, apparently everybody in Scotland voted to remain in the EU.

Mr Speaker: Order. We must focus on the independence referendum, not on the European Union.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State not think that, once we have clarity on what Brexit will really mean for the people of Scotland, it is right for them to decide their future, and that it is not for Westminster politicians to stop people making a decision?

David Mundell: We had an independence referendum in 2014. The outcome was decisive. We were told ahead of that referendum that it was to be a “once in a generation”—indeed, once in a lifetime—event, and that is what it should be.

City Deals

4. Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What progress the Government have made on their deal for every city in Scotland. [904139]

7. Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What progress the Government have made on their plans to deliver a city deal for every city in Scotland. [904142]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The UK Government are either negotiating or implementing a city region deal for all of Scotland’s seven great cities and the regions around them. So far we have committed over £1 billion to this landmark programme, and there is more to come. We are currently negotiating with local partners for both the Stirling and Clackmannanshire and Tay cities deals, and we hope to conclude the heads of agreements in the coming months.

Paul Masterton: The Secretary of State will be aware that a number of the projects associated with the Glasgow region city deal, including two taking place in East Renfrewshire, are over budget and behind schedule. Does he agree that it is vital that we get to work on these projects as soon as possible, so that local communities can benefit?

David Mundell: I do agree with my hon. Friend about raising those issues with the Glasgow city deal. It is not enough just to sign these deals and to promote them; what we need is delivery, and I will look at the specific issues he has raised.

Luke Graham: Will my right hon. Friend help to break the deadlock with the devolved Administration and commit to the amount of money that Westminster is willing to put forward in the Stirling and Clackmannanshire deal, so that Clackmannanshire can realise its true ambition?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend has certainly been a strong advocate for Clackmannanshire in this process. I hope to meet the Scottish Government shortly to discuss both this deal and the Tay cities deal, in the hope that the Scottish Government and the UK Government can go forward with local partners in a collaborative way.
Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State share my frustration at the lack of progress on the Ayrshire growth deal? Does he agree that it is time to get on and kick-start the deal for all the people of Ayrshire?

David Mundell: Yes I do.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Further to that question, will the Secretary of State give us a timeline for when the UK Government will agree the Ayrshire growth deal?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman’s constant flow of negativity is in marked contrast to the three local authorities that I met recently in Ayrshire, which are very keen to work with the Scottish Government and the UK Government to make the Ayrshire growth deal a reality.

Leaving the EU

5. Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on the effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU.

6. Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on the effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU.

7. Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on the effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): As Members would expect, I have very regular discussions with the Prime Minister and the Cabinet regarding UK Government policy and how it affects Scotland. The UK Government are committed to securing a deal that works for all parts of the UK, including Scotland.

Hannah Bardell: Has the Secretary of State just given up on getting the consent of the Scottish Parliament for any changes to its powers on the devolved settlement that this Tory Government plan to make, or is he so out of the loop that he no longer gets invited to Cabinet meetings and has quite simply become an irrelevance?

David Mundell: I do not know who briefs the hon. Lady, but the Joint Ministerial Committee on EU Negotiations is meeting tomorrow. We are meeting with Mike Russell and Mark Drakeford, and we hope to take forward the solid progress that we have achieved over the course of these meetings.

Stephen Gethins: One area where the Scottish and UK Governments appear to agree is that plans to take us out of the single market will be devastating for Scotland’s GDP, so can he tell us what plans he has to protect public services in Scotland from that?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman usually takes his brief with great seriousness, and therefore I am sure that he will have read the Prime Minister’s speech, if not watched it last week, which set out how the UK Government will approach the negotiations.

Mhairi Black: We have seen the Secretary of State go back on his words about the single market and have his authority undermined by not being invited to the PM’s Brexit meeting, and we are still waiting for his amendments to the withdrawal Bill. Given that the deadline is next Thursday, will this be just another catalogue of failures for the Secretary of State?

David Mundell: I would be very pleased if, after tomorrow’s meeting of the JMCEN, we are able to bring forward an agreed amendment that can be tabled in the House of Lords. That is certainly the aspiration of the UK Government.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Last week, the Prime Minister met me and colleagues from our fishing constituencies around the UK, including Scotland. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the meeting highlighted how this Government are serious about realising the opportunity presented by Brexit, and reminded us that only this Government will take us out of the common fisheries policy?

David Mundell: Absolutely. Since his election to this place last year, my hon. Friend has been a powerful advocate for the fishing industry and the expressed wish of the fishing industry to leave the common fisheries policy, and that is what this Government will deliver for the fishing industry in Scotland.

11. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): My right hon. Friend is no doubt aware of the enormous benefits that Brexit potentially provides for the Scottish economy, as part of one United Kingdom, but does he also agree with Corby Scots—Scots in my constituency—that the talk of an unwanted second independence referendum far outweighs any risk that Brexit might present?

David Mundell: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that talk of a second independence referendum is unwelcome and unnecessary. We have reached the point in the negotiations where we all need to come together and work with the Prime Minister to get the best possible deal for Scotland and the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What progress is being made on ensuring that Scotland’s food producers will still have the protection that they need for important geographic brands such as Orkney beef or Shetland lamb after we have left the European Union?

David Mundell: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that, despite scare stories to the contrary that have appeared in some parts of the media, there will be no change to the protection of those brands or an allowing in of false brands purporting to be them.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Non-UK nationals are essential to the agricultural industry in East Lothian. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that they will still have the same access after we leave the EU?

David Mundell: I very much welcomed the debate in this Parliament on that issue, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) who has been a strong advocate of the need for seasonal workers in

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Scotland, particularly in the soft fruit industry. The points raised in that debate and in the meetings of the Scottish Affairs Committee have all been recognised by the Government and will be looked at as we move forward.

**Stirling and Clackmannanshire City Region Deal**

6. **Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal. [904141]

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The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): My colleague the noble Lord Duncan met with partners recently at the Forth Valley College, and I have met Cabinet Secretary Keith Brown to discuss the Scottish contribution to the deal. I hope to meet Mr Brown again shortly.

Stephen Kerr: It sometimes feels that the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city deal is taking longer to deliver than a baby elephant at Blair Drummond safari park. When does the Secretary of State expect to sign a heads of agreement with the Scottish Government and the local authorities? What discussions has he had with the Secretary of State for Defence on the future use of the Ministry of Defence site at Forthside in the city deal? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear the answer, to hear whether the Secretary of State is widening it beyond Stirling and Clackmannshire or not.

David Mundell: We hope to sign that deal soon. The Ministry of Defence intends to dispose of Forthside by 2020, under the better defence estate strategy. We are working with the MOD to look at how the site can be part of that city deal.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: I give the hon. Gentleman the benefit of the doubt, but he must not shoehorn his own constituency into the matter. Let’s hear it.

Stewart Hosie: The Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal does indeed include the transfer of MOD land at Forthside, and the decontamination of that land, to Stirling Council. I understand that that is no longer going to happen. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether it will happen and when will it happen, or is it yet another broken Tory promise?

David Mundell: How disappointing to allow that negative note into proceedings on city deals. City deals have worked because they have been a positive collaboration between the UK Government, Scottish Government, local authorities and partners, and it is exactly that sort of negativity and politicking that undermines the whole process.

Mr Speaker: It may be negative, but at least it was definitely orderly.

**Scottish Economy**

8. **Ged Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the strength of the Scottish economy. [904144]

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The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): The latest official figures show that the Scottish economy is growing, but at a slower pace than we would like and continuing to lag behind the UK. The UK Government are delivering for Scotland, including with our UK-wide industrial strategy, and of course with £2 billion of extra spending for Scotland, but the Scottish Government hold many of the levers that could drive growth, and they should be using those to make sure Scotland becomes a competitive place to do business. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I understand the sense of anticipation in the House, but we are discussing the strength of the Scottish economy, in which colleagues should take a polite and respectful interest.

Ged Killen: The Secretary of State will be aware of the proposed closure of the 2 Sisters chicken plant in my constituency, with 450 jobs at risk. Will he join me in calling on the Scottish Government to set up a taskforce to look at viable alternatives? Will he agree to meet me to set out any help the UK Government might be able to offer?

Stuart Andrew: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, and yes, absolutely; the Secretary of State and I were talking about this this morning. He is more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman, and will raise the issue with the Scottish Government on his behalf.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): The success of the economy of the south of Scotland is clearly linked to that of the economy of the north of England, particularly my constituency of Carlisle. Does the Minister agree that the borderlands initiative is an exciting opportunity for both sides of the border to boost economic growth?

Stuart Andrew: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We are of course bringing about growth deals all over the country, and we also need to look at those areas where we can have them across borders, so we completely welcome the project he talks about.

Mr Speaker: I call the hon. Gentleman’s namesake, Stuart C. McDonald.

14. [904150]Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me to discuss the potentially disastrous consequences for workers in the community of Cumbernauld if the proposed closure of the tax office there is allowed to proceed?

Stuart Andrew: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Finally, I call Toby Perkins.

**ATP Tennis Tournament**

9. **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to work with the Scottish Government and the Lawn Tennis Association on hosting an ATP World Tour tennis tournament in Scotland. [904145]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): We know your interest in tennis, Mr Speaker. The success of Andy Murray in the singles,
Jamie Murray in the doubles and Gordon Reid in the wheelchair event has undoubtedly increased interest in tennis in Scotland. We would certainly support measures that encourage more people to engage with tennis and, indeed, any sport in Scotland.

Toby Perkins: I am very encouraged to hear that. As we look towards the legacy of Andy Murray, the greatest British tennis player ever, it would be great to see the UK Government, the Scottish Government and perhaps even Glasgow City Council working together with the Lawn Tennis Association to make a profitable tennis tournament at ATP elite level.

Stuart Andrew: Indeed; Scotland has been a great venue for tennis. The Scottish Government actually lead on this. It would be welcome to hear anything from the Scottish Government, and we would be more than happy to meet them to discuss the situation.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904221] Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 7 March.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I would like to begin by updating the House on the Government’s response to the incident that occurred in Salisbury on Sunday. I pay tribute to the work of all the emergency services who responded at the scene, and those who are now caring for the two critically ill individuals in hospital. As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary told the House yesterday, the police investigation is ongoing. Yesterday afternoon, I chaired a meeting of the National Security Council, where we were updated on that investigation, which is now being led by counter-terrorism police. This morning, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary chaired a meeting of the Government’s emergency committee, Cobra, and she has asked the police to provide an update later today.

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.

Simon Hoare: Representing a south-west constituency, may I align my remarks with those of my right hon. Friend? The incident in Salisbury has clearly caused great concern across the south-west and, of course, the country.

North Dorset’s councils and I share the Prime Minister’s commitment to delivering new housing, such as the 1,800 new homes proposed for Gillingham in my constituency. We understand how housing transforms lives and supports local economic growth. May I welcome this week’s announcement from the Prime Minister? Let us get Britain building and deliver those quality homes of all tenures that our constituents now need.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of housing. Earlier this week, I confirmed that the Government are rewriting the rules on planning to help restore the dream of home ownership. We want to see planning permissions going to people who are actually going to build houses, not just sit on land and watch its value rise. Our new rules will also make sure that the right infrastructure is in place to support housing developments, and planning changes will also allow more affordable homes to be prioritised for key workers. The Government have made it a priority to build the homes people need so that everyone can afford a safe and decent place to live.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the short statement she made concerning the incident in Salisbury. I think we all thank the emergency and security services for their response, and we await updates on the progress of investigations into the cause of that incident.

Tomorrow is International Women’s Day—a chance both to celebrate how far we have come on equality for women but also to reflect on how far we have to go, not just in this country but around the world.

Later today, the Prime Minister is due to meet Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the ruler of Saudi Arabia. Despite much talk of reform, there has been a sharp increase in the arrest and detention of dissidents, torture of prisoners is common, human rights defenders are routinely sentenced to lengthy prison terms, and unfair trials and executions are widespread, as Amnesty International confirms. As she makes her arms sales pitch, will she also call on the Crown Prince to halt the shocking abuse of human rights in Saudi Arabia?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for telling me that it is International Women’s Day tomorrow. I think that is what is called mansplaining.

I look forward to welcoming Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman from Saudi Arabia to this—[HON. MEMBERS: “Shame on you!”] Labour Back Benchers are shouting “Shame” from a sedentary position. I say to those Back Benchers that the link we have with Saudi Arabia is historic and important, and has potentially saved the lives of hundreds of people in this country. The fact that it is an important link is not just a view that I hold. The shadow Foreign Secretary said this morning:

“Our relationship with Saudi Arabia is an important one”.

She went on to say:

“that doesn’t mean that we should be pulling our punches.”

I agree, which is why I will be raising concerns about human rights with the Crown Prince when I meet him.

As the right hon. Gentleman started on the issue of International Women’s Day, I welcome the fact that the Crown Prince will be sitting down with, as the guest of, a female Prime Minister.

Jeremy Corbyn: A year on, the Government are still suppressing a report on the funding of extremism, which allegedly found evidence of Saudi funding going to terrorist groups here in the UK, thus threaten our security. When will that report come out?

A humanitarian disaster is now taking place in Yemen. Millions face starvation and 600,000 children have cholera because of the Saudi-led bombing campaign and the blockade—600,000 children with cholera is something that everyone in this House should take seriously. Germany has suspended arms sales to Saudi Arabia, but British arms sales have increased sharply and British military advisers are directing the war. It cannot be right that the right hon. Lady’s Government are colluding in what
the United Nations says is evidence of war crimes. Will the Prime Minister use her meeting with the Crown Prince today to halt the arms supplies and demand an immediate ceasefire in Yemen?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman raised two questions. On the first point about the Home Office’s internal review, the Government are committed to stamping out extremism in all its forms. When I was Home Secretary, I launched the counter-extremism strategy. My right hon. Friend the current Home Secretary has appointed our counter-extremism commissioner. The review gave us the best picture of how extremists operating in the UK sustain their activities and improved our understanding of that. Its most important finding was that, contrary to popular perception, Islamist extremists draw most of their financial support from domestic, rather than overseas, sources.

I understand that because of some of the personal content in the report, it has not been published. However, Privy Counsellors have been invited to go to the Home Office to read the report. That invitation was extended, I believe, to the shadow Home Secretary, so she and other Privy Council colleagues on the Labour Front Bench are free to go and read the report.

The second issue that the right hon. Gentleman raised was the humanitarian situation in Yemen. We are all concerned about the appalling humanitarian situation in Yemen and the effect that it is having on people, particularly women and children. That is why the Government have increased our funding for Yemen. For 2017-18, we increased it to over £200 million. We are the third largest humanitarian donor to Yemen. We are delivering life-saving aid that will provide nutrition support for 1.7 million people and clean water for 1.2 million people.

I was pleased that when I went to Saudi Arabia in December I met the Crown Prince, and raised with him the need to open the port of Hodeidah to humanitarian and commercial supplies. I am pleased to say that Saudi Arabia then did just that. This vindicates the engagement that we have with Saudi Arabia and the ability to sit down with them. Their involvement in Yemen came at the request of the legitimate Government of Yemen. It is backed by the United Nations Security Council, and as such we support it. On the humanitarian issue, it is for all parties in the conflict to ensure that they allow humanitarian aid to get through to those who need it.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Of course we all want all possible humanitarian aid to go to Yemen to help the people who are suffering, but I refer the right hon. Lady to the remarks made by the former International Development Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who said:

"we must not be afraid to condemn the nightly attacks on Yemen by the Saudi air force that have killed and maimed innocent men, women and children."

There has to be an urgent ceasefire to save lives in Yemen.

Why does the Prime Minister think that rough sleeping fell under Labour but has doubled under the Conservatives?

**The Prime Minister:** To respond to the first question raised by the right hon. Gentleman on the conflict taking place in Yemen, we have encouraged the Saudi Arabia Government to ensure that when there are allegations of activity taking place that is not in line with international humanitarian law, they investigate them and learn the lessons. I believe something like 55 reports have already been published as a result of that.

On arms exports to Saudi Arabia, the right hon. Gentleman seems to be at odds with his shadow Foreign Secretary once again. This morning she said the arms industry is not something she is seeking to undermine, as long as it is within international law. She went on to say that she thought the UK can sell arms to any country as long as they are used within the law. We agree. This country has a very tight arms export regime, and when there are allegations of arms not being used within the law we expect that to be investigated and lessons to be learned.

On rough sleeping, nobody in this House wants to see anybody having to sleep rough on the streets. That is why this Government are putting in millions of pounds extra to deal with rough sleeping. It is why we are piloting the Housing First approach in three of our major cities. We want to ensure not just that we deal with the situation when somebody is found sleeping rough, but that we prevent people from sleeping rough in the first place.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** In November, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a rough sleeping taskforce and £28 million for three pilot schemes to tackle homelessness. I understand that, four months on, the taskforce has not yet met and not a penny has been spent on that programme. There is a homelessness crisis in this country: rough sleeping has doubled since 2010. Does the Prime Minister not think it is a little unambitious to say that we are going to tackle rough sleeping by 2027?

**The Prime Minister:** We are going to eliminate it by 2027—that is our aim. Perhaps it would be helpful, Mr Speaker, if I was to update the right hon. Gentleman. The taskforce he referred to has in fact met. It met today. More importantly—the right hon. Gentleman has asked me this previously—it is not the only group of people we bring together to look at rough sleeping. We have an expert advisory group that has been meeting over recent months, and whose reports, information and expertise are being in-built to that taskforce.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about homelessness. Statutory homelessness is less than half its peak in 2003, but we recognise that there is more to do. That is why we want more homes to be built. On rough sleeping, of course we want people to have a roof over their head, but about half of rough sleepers have a mental health problem. That is why we are putting more money into mental health. That is why it is not just a question of improving figures; it is a question of changing people’s lives around. If the right hon. Gentleman really cares, he will look at the complexity of this issue and recognise it is about more than giving people a roof over their head. It is about dealing with the underlying problems that lead to them rough sleeping in the first place.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I am glad that the Government showed such urgency in setting up this taskforce that it took four months to have a meeting of it, and it still has not achieved anything. Many people in this country are very upset and very embarrassed about the levels of rough sleeping in this country, and many volunteer. I got a letter this week from Barry:

"I volunteer in my hometown of Southampton to feed the homeless because the lack of care and help for these individuals is a disgrace."
He goes on to point out the number of unoccupied buildings in his town and many others. Does the Prime Minister believe that her Government cutting homelessness services by 45% since 2010 has had some effect on the numbers of people who are rough sleeping?

**The Prime Minister:** If the right hon. Gentleman thinks that the only way issues are solved is by bringing people together at a meeting, I have to tell him that that is not the way to solve issues. The way to deal with these issues is actually to get out there on the ground and do something about it. That is why we are funding 48 projects to help rough sleepers into emergency accommodation and to overcome issues like mental ill health and substance abuse. It is why councils around the country, during the severe weather, have been ensuring that they provide accommodation for people who are sleeping on the streets, but also dealing with the underlying issues that lead to somebody sleeping on the streets. It is why we are ensuring that we are implementing Housing First in a number of regions, to put entrenched rough sleepers into accommodation as a first step to rebuilding their lives.

This is not about figures; it is about people. It is about ensuring that we take the action necessary to deal with the problems that people face that lead to them rough sleeping. It is also about ensuring that we build enough homes in this country for people, and that is why what we are doing to revise the planning laws, to ensure that people build houses when they have planning permission, should be welcomed by the right hon. Gentleman when he stands up.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I do not think any of that would come as much comfort to the rough sleepers I meet, who are begging every day just to find enough money to get into a night shelter. The Conservative chair of the Local Government Association, Lord Porter, warned that “councils are now beyond the point where council tax” can plug the gap. That is the result of the Government’s slashing of council budgets and passing on the buck.

After this deadly cold winter, we have more than twice as many people sleeping rough on our streets. Just one step away from that fate are 60,000 homeless households in temporary accommodation. We are the fifth richest country in the world. The growing number of people on our streets is a mark of national shame. With fewer social homes being built, less support for the homeless and a taskforce that has barely met, just how does the Prime Minister propose to tackle the homelessness crisis?

**The Prime Minister:** We propose to deal with homelessness and the issue of people who are not homeless but want to be able to have a home of their own by building more homes in this country. We propose to deal with it, as I said earlier this week, by ensuring that tenants get a fairer deal when they rent in this country. But I have to say that more council houses have been built under this Conservative Government than were built in 13 years under Labour. More social housing has been built in the last seven years than in the last seven years under the Labour Government. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to look at a record in relation to housing, he should look at the record of the last Labour Government.

Of course, the record of the last Labour Government was described as bringing—[**Interuption.**]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Mr Perkins, I know you asked about tennis earlier, but you now appear to be attempting some imitation of crochet. You should not be making these curious gesticulations; they make you look even odder than—they make you look very odd. [**Interuption.**] Well, I thought your behaviour was a tad odd, and I am concerned about your wellbeing. I think the hon. Members for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) will look after you.

**The Prime Minister:** The record of the last Labour Government on housing was described as a crisis, bringing misery and despair. Who said the last Labour Government’s record was bringing misery and despair? It was the Leader of the Opposition. The right hon. Gentleman said that Labour did not have a good record on housing, and I agree. It is the Conservatives who are delivering the homes the country needs.

**Q2. [904222] Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire):** Over the last three years, more than 2,000 new homes have been built in North West Leicestershire, including a record 731 in the last 12 months. Additionally, my local authority is building new council houses for the first time in decades. That is all in contrast with the 227 houses completed in the year to 2010, which was the last time Labour was in government. Will my right hon. Friend use North West Leicestershire as an example to other local authorities and show them our unemployment rate of 1% and the fact that we have no rough sleepers?

**The Prime Minister:** I am pleased that my hon. Friend has raised the example of North West Leicestershire, and we are very happy to join him in acknowledging the example it is setting. Of course, the figures he quoted contributed to the 217,000 new homes built across the country last year, which was the best year bar one in the last 30 years in terms of the number of new homes, but there is more to do. That is why we have rewritten the planning rules and had measures in the Budget to make money available and help people on to the housing ladder through the Help to Buy scheme. Once again, as he mentioned, it is the Conservatives in government who are delivering the homes that people need.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber (SNP): On 6 February, the Royal Bank of Scotland announced that 10 branches earmarked for closure were to be given a reprieve, subject to a review at the end of the year. Will the Prime Minister join me in calling on the Royal Bank of Scotland to do what it can to encourage people to open accounts and make sure these branches are sustainable?

**The Prime Minister:** As the right hon. Gentleman knows full well, the opening and closing of branches is a commercial matter for the Royal Bank of Scotland. He asks me to call on people to open accounts and use the branches, but of course one reason bank branches are closing is that more people are choosing not physically to go into them but to bank on the internet. It is up to customers to decide what banking arrangements suit them.
Ian Blackford: I remind the Prime Minister that we own the Royal Bank of Scotland and that she ought to be holding the company to account. I had a phone call from a constituent of mine, an Angus Mather, who phoned the Royal Bank of Scotland yesterday wanting to open accounts for himself and his family. Rather than opening them in the local branch in Kyle, which is one of those earmarked for reprieve, he was told to approach a branch elsewhere. It is outrageous that the Royal Bank of Scotland is undermining the ability of these branches to stay open. Will she finally call in the chief executive, Ross McEwan, and tell him that this behaviour must end?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has raised these questions before. I would have thought, given his background, that he would understand that these decisions are taken by commercial organisations and that it is not for the Government to tell people what sort of accounts to have or in which branches to open them. We take steps to ensure that where there are branch closures, other facilities are available; that is why we have the agreement with the Post Office to provide additional ability for people to use services through the Post Office. It is not right for him to suggest, that the Government should be telling people where to have their bank accounts and how to hold them. There are commercial decisions for banks on bank branches, and there are decisions for individual customers on their own banking arrangements.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am pleased to say that we are now on to Back-Bench Members. I want to hear lots of them.

Q5. [904225] Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Thanks to income tax hikes by the Scottish national party Government, thousands of UK armed forces personnel who are stationed in Scotland will pay more tax than their counterparts south of the border. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that this Conservative Government are reviewing the steps that they can take to clean up the SNP’s mess and mitigate the tax rise for our brave servicemen and women?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. As a result of decisions made by the Scottish nationalists in government in Scotland, many people there will be paying higher taxes. Those earning more than £26,000 will pay higher taxes in Scotland than in the rest of the United Kingdom. I was in the Chamber for the end of Defence questions the other day when my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary said that he was looking into the point that my hon. Friend has raised about armed forces personnel in Scotland.

Q3. [904223] Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Labour lifted a million children out of poverty, and this Government are on course to plunge a record 37% of children into poverty. Vulnerable people are being denied social care because of Government cuts in local authority budgets. Is this really a society that is working for everyone?

The Prime Minister: The number of people in absolute poverty has fallen under this Conservative Government. However, we want to ensure that families are helped to support themselves, which is why we have increased the national living wage, increased the personal allowance and so taken more people out of income tax, and revised the benefits system so that more people are encouraged and able to get into the workplace.

Q9. [904229] Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I am sure my right hon. Friend will agree that good air quality will improve the lives of everyone in the country, and the lives of their children and grandchildren. We are launching a Joint Committee on the subject, because cross-Government work between the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department of Health and the Department for Transport is important. Will the Prime Minister appoint a member of the Cabinet to co-ordinate that work to ensure that our children and grandchildren benefit from better air quality?

The Prime Minister: This is an important issue. We are committed to being the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited. We are taking action on pollution, and I am pleased that emissions of toxic nitrogen oxides fell by almost 27% between 2010 and 2016, but there is of course more for us to do, which is why we have a £3.5 billion plan to tackle poor air quality and provide cleaner transport. Later this year, we will publish a strategy that will set out further steps.

I assure my hon. Friend that both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, whose Department covers energy and air quality issues, and the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, who attends Cabinet, are very well versed in putting together the arguments for better air quality.

Q4. [904224] Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): As the Saudi Crown Prince sweeps across Westminster and Whitehall, will the Prime Minister pledge to raise the specific case of the jailed writer Raif Badawi? He has languished in a prison for six years, all because he wrote some things that his Government did not like. His wife and children have now claimed asylum in Canada. Will the Prime Minister pledge to raise his case, and will she also do something that her predecessor never did? Will she stand at the Dispatch Box and say that Raif Badawi is no criminal, and that he should be set free?

The Prime Minister: I will be raising a number of cases with the Crown Prince when I see him over the next couple of days, but we do not wait for a visit from the Crown Prince to raise the case of Raif Badawi. We monitor the situation regularly and raise the issue regularly with the Saudi Government, and we will continue to do so.

Q12. [904232] Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Will the Prime Minister support the work that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Oil and Gas Authority are doing to facilitate the production of £1 trillion of oil and gas revenue from the continental shelf, supporting 300,000 jobs? Will she also join me in paying tribute to the men and women who work offshore to ensure that our homes stay warm?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to those who work in our offshore oil and gas industry, and thanking them for the
work that they do. Last week’s weather highlighted just how important that work is to us all. We remain committed to supporting the industry, building on the £2.3 billion package announced in recent Budgets. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the oil and gas sector recently committed themselves to working together to ensure that the UK continues to enjoy the benefits of a world-leading offshore oil and gas industry.

Q6. [904226] Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Nottingham needs to find an extra £12 million this year to care for elderly and disabled people, but the Government’s answer—adding 3% to council tax bills—only raises just over £3 million, leaving a huge gap to be filled. No wonder Lord Porter, Conservative chair of the Local Government Association, warns that some councils will “be pushed perilously close to the financial edge.” Will the Prime Minister wake up to the social care crisis and urge the Chancellor to give local government the funding it needs in next week’s spring statement?

The Prime Minister: We have recognised the pressures that social care is under. That is why in successive fiscal events the Chancellor has given extra money to local authorities and the social care sector as a whole. Next week’s statement is not a Budget, but we have ensured that more money is going into local councils, not just through the precept that they are able to raise, but £2 billion extra has been put into social care in local authorities.

Q15. [904235] Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): The UK internal market is by far the most important market for British goods and services today and post-Brexit. Does the Prime Minister agree that the people and businesses of my constituency and across Wales are best served by the four nations of the United Kingdom working together constructively and positively to make Brexit a success?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend about the four nations working together to make a success of Brexit, but this Government are also committed to strengthening our precious Union of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This is about providing continuity and certainty for people and businesses, and it is about making sure we do not create new barriers to doing business in what is, as my hon. Friend said, our country.

Q7. [904227] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York’s housing crisis is out of control: whole families crammed into tiny box bedrooms; hundreds of damp and mouldy council homes; and street homelessness up fifteenfold since 2010. My constituents do not want warm platitudes from the Prime Minister; they just want warm homes, so when can they have the social housing that they so desperately need and that York’s Tory-Lib Dem council has completely failed to deliver; as does the Prime Minister’s strategy?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady will have heard earlier, the Government are making changes to ensure that we build more homes in this country. But I also say to the hon. Lady that one of the issues we have had to look at is making sure that local councils are producing local plans. I believe that York has not had a local plan for 50 years; I suggest the hon. Lady speaks to her council about it.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): On Sunday evening it was not Meryl Streep winning an Oscar but my constituent Maisie Sly, just six years old and born profoundly deaf, after her amazing performance in the film “The Silent Child”. Will the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to the inspirational Maisie Sly and her school Red Oaks Primary, which has helped her fulfill her true potential?

The Prime Minister: I think everybody was captivated by Maisie’s example and the film that won the Oscar, and I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to Maisie for her incredible achievement. This is important in highlighting the issue of disabled people, particularly deaf children, and it has captured the imagination of so many across the world.

Q8. [904228] Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): On Friday next week the House will debate the private Member’s Bill on refugee family reunification being introduced by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). It is a very simple Bill that will allow families torn apart by conflict to rebuild their lives here together. It is supported by a coalition of organisations including the Red Cross, Amnesty International and the Refugee Council. Will the Government add their support to this very important Bill?

The Prime Minister: This country has a good record of ensuring we are providing places for refugees and helping the most vulnerable, but I understand that, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, we are listening to the points being made in relation to this Bill; we appreciate the concern about family reunification and there are already rules in existence, but we will look carefully at this.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): This week is National Apprenticeship Week and, as a former apprentice, I can highly recommend this route into the workplace. The Government have a great record of delivering more apprenticeships, and higher-level apprenticeships are up 35% on last year. Will the Prime Minister ensure that all schools are promoting apprenticeships, particularly those at degree level, as a first-class, debt-free choice, not a second-class option?

The Prime Minister: It is very important that we promote apprenticeships not as a second-class option, but as an equally valid route through training and education for young people. It is about getting the right education for every young person, and we should encourage schools to talk about apprenticeships at an earlier stage. When I visited a school in Southall with my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary to make my announcement about the tertiary education review, the sixth-formers made the point that they had heard about university throughout their schooling, but they only heard about apprenticeships at the very last minute of sixth form. It is important that we open up all opportunities to young people.
Q10. [904230] Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Can the Prime Minister explain why there was a 60% drop in apprenticeships last year?

The Prime Minister: We have introduced the apprenticeship levy, and we are looking at its application. We have a commitment over a period of years for the number of apprenticeships, and we are going to increase that number to 3 million over this Parliament. We will be doing that, and we will look very carefully at the operation of the apprenticeship levy and its impact.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): On International Women’s Day tomorrow, we will be celebrating record numbers of women in work, including of course our second female Prime Minister, yet attitudes towards pregnancy mean that more than 50,000 women a year are forced out of their job just for having a baby. When will the Government be taking forward the review of existing protections for pregnant women that was promised following the Women and Equalities Committee’s inquiry into this important issue?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. We have very clear laws in this country that say that discrimination in the workplace is unlawful, and there are clear regulations in place that employers must follow. In our response to the Taylor review, we committed to update the information about pregnancy and maternity discrimination, and we will review the legislation relating to protection against redundancy within the next 12 months.

Q11. [904231] Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): The Prime Minister continues to sing the praises of universal credit while wilfully ignoring the devastation that it is still causing. How does she square human suffering caused by universal credit?

The Prime Minister: Universal credit was introduced as a simpler benefit that enables and encourages people to get into the workplace. We have made a number of changes to the way in which universal credit is operated, including ensuring that it is now possible for somebody to get a 100% advance on their universal credit in very quick time at the start of their application where that is appropriate. Universal credit is a benefit that helps people get into the workplace, and work is the best route out of poverty.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Storm Emma left a trail of destruction along the south coast of Devon, including washing away large stretches of the A379 along the Slapton line. Will the Prime Minister please assure my constituents that they will not be left isolated and their communities separated, and will she pledge funds to help rebuild this vital link? Will she also join me in thanking the emergency services, both in my constituency and around the United Kingdom, for their extraordinary work in desperately difficult circumstances?

The Prime Minister: I and, I am sure, everyone in the House will be happy to join my hon. Friend in praising the emergency services for the tireless work that they have been doing to help people during the severe winter weather that we have experienced. She is right to raise concerns about the A379 on the behalf of her constituents, and I am pleased to announce that my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary will shortly confirm that we will provide financial assistance to ensure that repairs to the road are undertaken as quickly as possible.

Q13. [904233] Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Battersea power station is a £9 billion development pushed through by Tory Wandsworth Council with only 9% so-called affordable homes. Eighty-five per cent. of homes in the development have been snapped up by foreign investors, which is an insult to the thousands of people on the Wandsworth housing waiting list. Is the Prime Minister embarrassed that a Tory council is siding with developers’ profits over the residents of Wandsworth?

The Prime Minister: This is a site that was derelict for 40 years. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. This is very discourteous. There is far too much noise in the Chamber. The question was heard—it was very forcefully delivered and very fully heard—and the Prime Minister’s answer must also be heard.

The Prime Minister: This is a site that was derelict for 40 years. It is now a site that will be providing homes and jobs, and I would have thought that is something to welcome.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): March is Brain Tumour Awareness Month, a month dedicated to supporting people affected by brain tumours and to raising funds and awareness. Brain tumours remain the biggest cancer killer of children and adults under 40, a fact that has to change. There has been great progress over the past month, with the Government turning their attention to this underfunded disease, but so much more can be done. Will the Prime Minister join me in commending all those helping to raise funds and awareness this month and in recognising the many thousands of people fighting this terrible disease by making a statement about how the Government will see the job through until we have the research, the care and the cure that many, many people need?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in commending all those who are raising awareness of brain cancer and who are working hard and tirelessly both on research and to raise funding. It is a devastating disease, and I was pleased to meet the noble Baroness Jowell to hear her experience of the national health service. She and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care then held a roundtable of brain cancer experts.

We have announced that an estimated £20 million will be invested through the National Institute for Health Research over the next five years in helping to fund essential brain cancer research. In addition, Cancer Research UK will be investing £25 million in research on brain tumours over the same period, helping to support two new specialised centres.

Q14. [904234] Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The increasing provision of healthcare within NHS England by private providers continues to cause the fragmentation and undermining of patient services.
The Prime Minister has thus far refused to exclude such services from a US trade deal. Can she tell us how the Scottish Government will be included in the negotiations so that they can protect our Scottish NHS from being bartered away to get a deal?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is a little late, because I was asked a question about a US trade deal and the national health service by the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) in this House on Monday, and I made it very clear that we retain the principles of the national health service and that we are not going to allow the national health service by the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) in this House on Monday, and I made it very clear that we retain the principles of the national health service and that we are not going to allow the national health service to be undermined by any trade deals we do.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Representatives of the Greater Grimsby project board will be meeting a Business Minister later today to discuss the next stage of the town deal. The proposals will be a great boost for the economy of Grimsby and Cleethorpes. Will my right hon. Friend reaffirm her support for the proposals and similar initiatives?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised this issue with me before, and I welcome the very strong public-private sector approach that is being pursued by the Greater Grimsby project board. He is playing an active role in the project, and I understand there have been a number of positive meetings with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. I encourage the board to continue engaging with officials on the details of the plan so that we can see that development, which is so important to the local area.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The House knows I am always concerned, whatever the time, to protect the rights of smaller parties, and today is no exception. I call Mr Nigel Dodds.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I am grateful for your protection, Mr Speaker.

Will the Prime Minister acknowledge, and indeed praise, the success of the EU negotiator, Michel Barnier, in bringing a measure of progress to the Brexit negotiations in that he has managed to unite the Government and the Opposition in utter defiance of the legal text he has brought forward from the December arrangements? Does she agree that now is the time for the EU to get on with examining the sensible, pragmatic arrangements on customs and the Northern Ireland border and to get on to the main trade negotiations?

Mr Speaker: We hear the right hon. Gentleman, but he has been indulged.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Now is the time for the European Union negotiators to get on with the job of discussing that trade and economic partnership for the future. I am pleased that we will also be able to discuss with the Irish Government and the Commission the practical details of delivering the solution for the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, so that the free flow of trade can continue not just between Northern Ireland and Ireland but between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Last month it was announced that the proposed merger between the British Transport police and Police Scotland was being put on hold in the wake of widespread criticism from a number of different parties. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with devolved Ministers, and what next steps can be taken? Will she join in me in calling on the SNP to scrap this ill-fated proposed merger?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concerns that have been expressed. Of course, we were committed to delivering on the Smith commission proposals, and as part of that we are devolving powers over the British Transport police in Scotland to the Scottish Government. As this is being looked at, the priority must remain the safety of the public, and we are committed to working with the Scottish Government to ensure a smooth transfer of the functions, should that be their decision. It is for the Scottish Government to decide, but I urge them to ensure that, as they take those decisions, they put the safety and security of the public first.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Is it Government policy that England should pull out of the World cup? If not, what on earth was the Foreign Secretary on about yesterday?

The Prime Minister: The point the Foreign Secretary was making yesterday was that, depending on what comes out of the investigation into the attack on the two individuals in Salisbury, it might be appropriate for the Government to look at whether Ministers and other dignitaries should attend the World cup in Russia.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): In advance of the Prime Minister’s meeting this afternoon with the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, does she agree that the kingdom is in fact a force for tremendous stability in a very turbulent region? Will she offer reassurance to the Crown Prince that this country will stand with him in his efforts to bring modernity, development and reform to our very important middle eastern ally?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. We have had a long-standing and historic relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and that will continue. It has been important in our security and defence, and in the stability of the region. Moreover, under the Crown Prince and his Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is reforming and changing and giving greater rights to women. We should encourage that and stand alongside and work with Saudi Arabia to help the Crown Prince deliver on his Vision 2030.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Today the Department for International Development launches the Jo Cox memorial grants, which will empower women in some of the most difficult parts of our world. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking wholeheartedly everyone at DFID who made this happen? Does she
also agree that, when it comes to preventing conflict, Jo’s legacy must teach us that women’s voices must be heard?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this particular issue, and I am happy to welcome the UK aid contribution to the Jo Cox memorial grants, as announced today by my right hon. Friend the International Development Secretary. Up to £10 million is being allocated to support grassroots organisations in delivering on two causes close to Jo’s heart: protecting against identity-based violence and boosting the social and economic and political empowerment of women and girls, helping to predict, prevent and protect against identity-based violence. The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Jo was a dedicated humanitarian. She fought for gender equality at home and in developing countries, and it is right that we as a Government and as a country encourage women’s voices to be heard, wherever they are.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must now bring proceedings to a close.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: There are urgent questions that come first. If there is a point of order, it will come after that, so I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be in his seat, eagerly expectant.
UK Relations: Saudi Arabia

12.49 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD) (Urgent Question): To ask the Foreign Secretary to make a statement on diplomatic and economic relations with Saudi Arabia.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I have been asked to respond on behalf of the Foreign Secretary, as he is currently at an engagement at the palace. The Prime Minister has invited the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, His Royal Highness Mohammed bin Salman, to visit the United Kingdom. We are delighted to welcome him and his delegation on his first official visit to the UK, which is taking place from today until Friday.

During the visit, the Prime Minister and the Crown Prince will launch a new and ambitious strategic partnership between our two countries, which will allow us to discuss a range of bilateral matters and foreign policy issues of mutual interest. The UK Government have a close and wide-ranging relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia is the UK’s third fastest growing market for exports, and we continue to work together to address regional and international issues, including Yemen. The visit will allow for a substantive discussion between the Crown Prince and the Prime Minister on the need for a political resolution to the conflict in Yemen, and how to address the humanitarian crisis.

The UK fully supports the Crown Prince’s social and economic reform programme, Vision 2030. His visit is an opportunity for him to underline his vision of an outward-looking Saudi Arabia, one that embraces a moderate and tolerant form of Islam, and a more inclusive Saudi society. This includes greater freedom for women, in line with the recent statements and reforms made by the Crown Prince. We believe these reforms are the best course for Saudi Arabia’s future security, stability and prosperity, and it is right that the UK supports the Crown Prince in his Vision 2030 endeavours.

Sir Vince Cable: Further to the exchange in Prime Minister’s questions, may I say that there will be widespread concern across parties about the fact that the dictatorial head of a medieval, theocratic regime is being given the red carpet equivalent of a state visit? May I ask specifically whether the Foreign Secretary will be demanding the ending of the bombing of civilian targets in the Yemen civil war, which Prince Mohammed initiated? Can the Minister explain why the safeguards on the use of British weapons, which were introduced at the end of the coalition at my insistence and that of my Liberal Democrat colleagues, are, apparently, no longer being applied? Will the Foreign Secretary insist on the ending of the blockade of ports in Yemen, which is contributing to the devastating humanitarian crisis and famine, of which we have heard much in this House? Will he defend the nuclear agreement with Iran, to which we are a party and which Prince Mohammed is actively seeking to undermine? Will he condemn the attempt by Prince Mohammed to foment the flames of sectarian conflict in Lebanon, Syria, Qatar and elsewhere? Has the Minister consulted the Government Economic Service on the current economic position of Saudi Arabia, which is no longer a swing oil producer and is running out of money, and where the main potential long-term deal available to the UK is the Saudi Aramco flotation, which will be achieved only by substantially devaluing the standards applied in the City of London?

Finally, on the threshold of International Women’s Day, may I ask whether the Minister intends to endorse Prince Mohammed’s view of modernisation: that women should be allowed to go to football matches, but not be allowed to marry, divorce, travel, have a driving licence or have an operation without the approval of their male relatives?

Alistair Burt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. His starting point and opening view of Saudi Arabia represents one of the reasons why the Crown Prince is here. The right hon. Gentleman used the word “medieval”, and the Crown Prince has been conducting a series of reforms and has made clear statements about where he wants to take the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Everyone is aware of its history and its past, but it is really important to look at what is happening at present—good things as well as difficult things—and to point the way forward that he has with Vision 2030, both in economic and society terms. When he speaks about a modernising country supporting moderate Islam, that should be taken as seriously as any reference to the Kingdom in the past.

The right hon. Gentleman asked a series of questions. He referred to the war in Yemen as being “initiated” by Saudi Arabia, but that is not correct. What happened was that an insurgency overthrew a legitimate Government, which was backed by the United Nations, and then sought support from their neighbours in order to deal with the insurgency. The insurgency is cruel: the Houthi have executed a number of people, not least the former President of Yemen; they hold people to ransom in areas that they occupy; and they have been preventing people from getting humanitarian aid. We support the efforts of the Saudi-led coalition in order to defend Yemen against the insurgency and, more importantly, to bring the conflict to an end. That is the most important thing, but it will take both parties to do this, not just the Saudis. On weapons sales, these are as strict as any in the world, as the right hon. Gentleman is aware, and there was a court case last year. We keep this under strict check to ensure that international humanitarian law is abided by and to make sure we can provide the support to Saudi Arabia that it needs to protect itself, not least in relation to weapons directed from Yemen towards its capital city—that should also not be forgotten.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to a blockade. There is no blockade; there are now no restrictions on the ports—the ports are open. There was a restriction from 19 December, following a missile attack on the capital of Yemen by Houthi forces. There is a strong suspicion that weapons were being smuggled into the country. That is why the restrictions were in place. Since 20 December, a total of 50 ships have docked, and the ports are open.1 The UK has played a substantial part in ensuring that those ports are open and that humanitarian aid comes in. We will strongly defend any comprehensive plan of action, which we believe is in the UK’s interests and those of the region.

On the economic prospects of Saudi Arabia, we know the area is changing, and that is what Vision 2030 is about; it is about moving, in time, from an oil-based

economy to something different. This provides tremendous opportunities for the region, as well as for Saudi Arabia, and we strongly support that. We would like the Aramco share option to be issued in the UK and we will continue to suggest that the City would be the best place for it.

Lastly, the right hon. Gentleman mentioned International Women’s Day. It is of course obvious to us that some of the easing in things relating to women in Saudi Arabia seems incredibly mundane—the ability to attend a football match and for the cinemas to be open, the mixed space and the ability to drive—but in a Saudi context, and in the context of a conservative region, these changes have immense significance. We do not always appreciate that, but we need to make reference to it. That further progress seems likely is very much in everyone’s minds, so we should not judge the progress to date as a full stop. The engagement of women, not only in the areas we have mentioned, but increasingly in business and in government, makes a real difference to the area. International Women’s Day is enhanced, to a degree, by the sorts of changes we have seen in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Members can be sure that our Prime Minister will make sure that that progress gets every support from the UK as we move forward.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his comprehensive answer to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable). Is my right hon. Friend as surprised as I am that the question was shorn of the context of the scale of the reforms now taking place in Saudi Arabia? May I urge the Government to continue our assistance to the Government of Saudi Arabia in order to deliver the astonishing scale of ambition associated with Vision 2030?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who rightly sets this in context. No one denies that there are difficult aspects to a relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, just as there are with a number of engagements the UK has with countries whose views and human rights issues we do not always share. But the important point he made is about having engagement to seek a common view of a future, one that, as he rightly says, is changing markedly and in a way that no one quite anticipated because of the arrival of the Crown Prince in his position. He could well have an influence on the region for the next 30 years, and our engagement and support for the moderate, modernising image he has for Saudi Arabia is important to all of us.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing it, even if it was ahead of my own application.

Let me make it clear at the outset that the Opposition want to have a good diplomatic and economic relationship with Saudi Arabia. But, as in any good relationship, there must be honesty. Most importantly, we must tell Saudi Arabia that as long as it continues the indiscriminate bombing of residential areas, farms and markets in Yemen, and as long as it continues to restrict the flow of food, medical supplies and fuels to a population suffering mass epidemics of malnutrition and cholera, it should not expect our support for that war and its Crown Prince does not deserve to have the red carpet rolled out for him here in Britain.

Let us look at the man to whom the British Government are bowing and scraping today. He is the architect of the Saudi air strikes and the blockade in Yemen; he is funding jihadi groups and the Houthis; he is ordering his guards to beat up the Prime Minister of Lebanon. In the eight months since he became Crown Prince, he has doubled the number of executions in Saudi Arabia. But we are supposed to ignore all that because of his proposal that Saudi women be allowed to drive, just as they can everywhere else in the world.

The UK Government pretend to care about human rights and war crimes, but when it comes to Saudi Arabia and Yemen, there is nothing but a shameful silence. We all know that that is because all that they ultimately care about is how to plug the hole in trade and growth that is coming because of their Brexit plans. If the Minister wants to dispute that, will he answer one simple question? When are the Government going to stop bowing down to Saudi Arabia and instead use our role as United Nations penholder on Yemen to demand an immediate ceasefire, an end to the blockade, proper peace talks and a permanent end to this dreadful, shameful war?

Alistair Burt: I thank the right hon. Lady for her words. She started well by talking about wanting to welcome a relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Should she actually occupy my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary’s position, she might want to review some of the personal comments that she made after that and wonder how that would constitute a decent start to the relationship that she wants to see.

Let me get to the substance and deal with one or two of the right hon. Lady’s questions. First, there is not indiscriminate bombing of civilians, as has been alleged. It is vital that we make sure that, in dealing with the military aspects of the conflict, which was not started by Saudi Arabia, we are able to see that, in terms of international humanitarian law, there is only the targeting of legitimate military targets. The United Kingdom has been as helpful as possible in trying to make sure that the training for that is appropriate. When there have been allegations of civilian casualties, those cases have been dealt with, monitored and investigated in a manner completely different from that in respect of Houthi activity, which I noticed the right hon. Lady did not discuss.

On the humanitarian issues, as I indicated, there is not a blockade or restriction of goods coming in. It is important that commercial food and fuel gets in. It is equally important that those who have had missiles targeted at them after those missiles have been smuggled into Yemen are able to protect themselves. We have worked hard to try to ensure that there is protection for Saudi Arabia from missiles coming in and, in doing so, to give Saudi Arabia the confidence to allow more ships to come in to deal with the humanitarian issues. That seems to me to be a constructive way to deal with both sides of the issues, rather than the straightforward condemnation that we heard from the right hon. Lady.

In respect of the current reforms in Saudi Arabia and those going forward, the right hon. Lady reduces them to de minimis by saying that it is all about women driving. As I indicated to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), who I have to say asked a rather more serious set of questions, the issue of
women’s progress is not simply about driving; it is about a whole series of other reforms. Driving has a totemic importance for many people in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia but should not be taken as the sole thing that is changing.

There has been no silence from the United Kingdom on Yemen. We have been very clear about the fact that there is no military solution, which is why we have been working so hard for a diplomatic solution, why we welcome the newly appointed UN envoy, whom the right hon. Lady did not mention, and why we are doing everything we can to try to make sure that there is a diplomatic base. All our evidence is that ceasefire fires work when there is some relationship on the ground that makes them plausible and feasible. Because of the activity of the Houthis, those who support them and those who direct weapons at Saudi Arabia, it is not possible for there to be a ceasefire with any sense of purpose or sense that it would actually work. What we must do—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister of State is in full flow, and we are listening to the flow of his eloquence and the eloquence of his flow. I say very gently to the shadow Foreign Secretary, who is normally a most restrained individual, that I understand how incredibly passionate she is but feel sure that in a courtroom she would not chunter noisily from a sedentary position, because she would earn the wrath of the judge.

Alistair Burt: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Let me be straightforward: calling for a ceasefire is not the same as having one. We all want to see an end to the conflict in Yemen, and we have said that very clearly to the Saudi coalition. We support the appointment of the new UN envoy and we are working for a ceasefire, but simply calling for one does not do it. We have to make sure that we have the facts on the ground so that we can make sure that a ceasefire actually works.

Emily Thornberry indicated dissent.

Alistair Burt: It is all very well for the right hon. Lady to shake her head, but she is not faced with some of the issues that face Government Ministers on this issue, and nor is she giving full credit to the efforts that are being made to try to bring this matter to an end. She is not the sole holder of conscience in this place as we deal with the difficulties of trying to address the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. That is what we are seeking to do and we will continue to bend all our efforts to that, with or without her support.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am happy to confirm that neither “Erskine May” nor any Standing Order of the House prohibits the shaking or, indeed, for that matter, the nodding of heads.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, another person who has been noisily chuntering from a sedentary position. She can now speak from her feet. I call Anna Soubry.

Anna Soubry: I would never do such a thing, Mr Speaker.

As you know, Mr Speaker, I am a feminist. When I was a Health Minister—serving in the same Government as the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), I might add—I had the honour to lead a delegation to Saudi Arabia, as a woman, obviously. At no time did I find any prejudice or disrespect, and I was quite surprised about that.

I commend all my right hon. Friend the Minister’s fine words. Does he agree that although we are obviously a long way from seeing in the Kingdom the sort of rights that we would expect of any modern civilised society, the best way to achieve those rights and to influence that country is to have firm conversations and a good relationship in private?

Mr Speaker: All I would say to the right hon. Lady, in the friendliest possible spirit, is that if in the course of her visit she met, for example, a prince, it might well be that that person thought that he was meeting a fellow royal.

Alistair Burt: I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) for her regally dispensed question. I absolutely concur with her sentiments. We do talk very frankly and honestly to counterparts, even in the most difficult circumstances. It is right that we express our interest in how reforms are going. They will not lead to a society that we have developed after many hundreds of years, but the progress that is being made is significant in the context of where Saudi Arabia wants to go and how it wants to lead the region. To talk about moderate Islam in an area where those who promote moderate Islam are at risk and threatened by others takes a degree of bravery and courage from the Saudi Arabian leadership. That is what we recognise. There is more to go, more work to do and more concerns to be expressed, but as my right hon. Friend said, making sure that it is done with engagement is a key part of the process.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Minister for once again coming to the Chamber to answer this urgent question. He will be aware that Yemen has been described as the world’s worst man-made humanitarian disaster. Members have been quite right to highlight the issue of women’s rights in Saudi Arabia ahead of International Women’s Day tomorrow. Will he also be raising the plight of women in Yemen, who, it has been reported, often have to choose which child to save owing to the cholera and famine effected by that conflict? The UK has leverage. Since the start of the war, UK arms sales have outstripped aid to Yemen 18 times over. Will he use that leverage? Finally—this is a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald)—will he have discussions about the fact that Raif Badawi is not a criminal?

Alistair Burt: I will, if I may, address two issues. In relation to Yemen, no one denies the scale of the humanitarian crisis. I have met officials from the UN, the Red Cross and the World Health Organisation, and we are as confident as we can be that support to prevent the next round of cholera will be in place. Of course, none of it should be necessary. If the conflict were ended, these concerns would not be raised, and that, of course, is what we are bending all our efforts to.
I genuinely wish it was as straightforward as saying to one of the parties to the conflict—to the party that did not start it—“if you stop doing anything, everything will be all right.” I honestly do not believe that that is the answer, which is why we work through other methods and other means. We have done all we can in relation to providing food, fuel and water and supporting those who deliver it, but the restrictions are caused by the conflict. They are caused by those who support the insurgents and what they have done, and we will do all we can to break that down. We do indeed raise the case of the blogger. We have followed that case very carefully and raised our concerns with Saudi Arabia.

**Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, actually, this is a good opportunity to welcome the progress being made on rights and opportunities for women in Saudi Arabia?

**Alistair Burt**: The United Kingdom stands full square with the Saudi Prince while he is here?

**Alistair Burt**: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that matter. The purpose of parliamentary visits, in which many Members engage, is to get an opportunity to see the context of a country. It is not about being given a grand tour of easy options, but about getting the chance to ask difficult questions. In my experience, Members of Parliament take that opportunity fully. To be able to observe, as my hon. Friend has, some of the palpable changes in where women are going and to speak to women now involved in culture, music and business, is to see where the country intends to take itself, and a woman’s voice in where it is going is an important one and increasingly heard.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituents, from Garnethill to Strathbungo and Dumbreck to Torrylen, have all been emailing me with deep concerns over the hospitality being afforded to the Saudi royalty against the backdrop of children regularly killed by the bombs that we are selling them. What more are the Government doing to ensure that the Saudis carry out the full implementation of the UN humanitarian response plan? Children in Yemen are dying far, far too frequently every single day and Yemen just cannot wait.

**Alistair Burt**: I agree with the hon. Lady—no, of course, Yemen cannot wait. As I said earlier, if I believed for a moment that asking one party to the conflict simply to stop its activities would bring an end to it, then we would all advocate that solution, but I do not believe that that is the case. There must be a negotiated end; it should come as quickly as possible, and we have been pressing for that for some considerable time. In the meantime, we are doing everything we can to ease the humanitarian situation, and we have seen an easing of restrictions, particularly since the visits of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development to Djibouti and to Riyadh in December, where she was able to explain to the coalition exactly what the international community was doing to seek to protect them. That led to an easing of the restrictions straight away, but nothing will truly help the people of Yemen until the conflict comes to an end. On that, she, her constituents and all the rest of us are absolutely right.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Speaker**: Order. I am very keen to accommodate remaining colleagues, but there is another urgent question to follow. We are immensely appreciative of the fund of knowledge and wisdom that is regularly on display from the right hon. Gentleman, but perhaps I may be permitted gently to observe that there is also no procedural or Standing Order bar, where appropriate in the mind of the Minister, on single-sentence answers to questions.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend welcome the social reforms already undertaken by the Crown Prince, and can he confirm that the Government will be encouraging the Saudi authorities to go further in this regard, because the very best way to influence them is to keep the door open? Let me also say, out of interest, that 52% of all graduates in the Kingdom in 2017 were women. There are 30 women members of the Shura Council, which proportionately is more than in the Senate. Of particular interest to me
is the fact that, in the transformation plan, there are some very, very positive moves on the environment, and these will have a far-reaching effect not just on the people of Saudi Arabia, but indeed globally.

Mr Speaker: No doubt in Taunton Deane.

Alistair Burt: As I could not put it any better myself, may I say that I agree with my hon. Friend, and that the United Kingdom will continue to give support in the direction that she advocates.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister share my fear that people in positions of responsibility may unwittingly put themselves on the side of prolonging, and indeed potentially worsening, the crisis if they, either by deceit or by design, choose to ignore areas where the Kingdom has, in part, corrected what were at times deplorable mistakes in its initial conduct of the conflict?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman has a deep knowledge of the area and the complexities involved. The conflict requires handling with balance, as do any of these difficult circumstances. We are right to understand the cause of the conflict, right to understand concerns that have been raised in its conduct, and right also to acknowledge that things have changed because of international pressure. Ultimately, when there is a situation in which an insurgency brings in external forces to attack a state, it could lead to an unfortunate set of consequences for the future if that state left the situation unattended. That is why we want to see the matter resolved, with the safety and security of Saudi and Yemen at the heart of a future peace arrangement.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Does my right hon. Friend acknowledge that the intervention of Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners in Yemen was at the request of the legitimate Government of that country? Does he also agree that the principal insurgents, the Houthis and their allies, Hezbollah, are funded and supplied by Iran whose actions are significantly prolonging the conflict in that country?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman has a deep knowledge of the area and the complexities involved. The conflict requires handling with balance, as do any of these difficult circumstances. We are right to understand the cause of the conflict, right to understand concerns that have been raised in its conduct, and right also to acknowledge that things have changed because of international pressure. Ultimately, when there is a situation in which an insurgency brings in external forces to attack a state, it could lead to an unfortunate set of consequences for the future if that state left the situation unattended. That is why we want to see the matter resolved, with the safety and security of Saudi and Yemen at the heart of a future peace arrangement.

Alistair Burt: I defer to my right hon. Friend in his entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Does my right hon. Friend acknowledge that the intervention of Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners in Yemen was at the request of the legitimate Government of that country? Does he also agree that the principal insurgents, the Houthis and their allies, Hezbollah, are funded and supplied by Iran whose actions are significantly prolonging the conflict in that country?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his observations. Although the circumstances in Yemen are indeed dire and call for a conclusion to the conflict, not to understand the origins of the conflict and how it was started—the call for help and assistance by the legitimate Government—would be to fail to understand how the conflict can properly be brought to a conclusion. That outside influences have been involved, causing great danger, and great fears and concerns, in the region is also extremely clear.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister mentioned the two holy places. Hundreds of thousands—probably millions—of British citizens aspire to go or will go on the Hajj. During these discussions, will he be raising the issues about their security, and the way in which they are treated? Will he also emphasise the importance of Saudi Arabia reviving the Arab peace initiative for a middle east peace settlement?

Alistair Burt: I would say two things. First, in relation to the Hajj, I do not know what is definitely on the agenda for each detail of the talks, but the hon. Gentleman and the House can be assured that the safety of those going to Hajj from the United Kingdom is always important, and often raised by the ambassador; and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia knows how important that is to all who undertake the pilgrimage.

On the Arab peace initiative, yes, as the hon. Gentleman knows, I am really interested in how the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia might respond to anything we see soon from the US envoys. The Arab peace initiative, which lies at the basis of potential solutions, as it has for some time, remains very much in the minds of those who want to see peace between the Palestinians and Israel.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): Historically, Saudi Arabia has channelled hundreds of millions, if not billions of pounds into the violent end of Islamic extremism all around the world. In my right hon. Friend’s assessment, has that approach shifted visibly under the Crown Prince?

Alistair Burt: The short answer to that is yes. We are all well aware of recent history, and that elements in Saudi Arabia may have been involved in elements of violent extremism. I think the setting of the Crown Prince’s face and his state against that, by calling for moderate Islam and for a modernisation, which flies in the face of those very extremists, is making clear the way in which Saudi Arabia wants to deal with its past and seek an alternative future.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): There is no mention at all of human rights in the Crown Prince’s modernisation programme, Vision 2030—perhaps not surprisingly, as more than 300 people have been executed since it was launched, including children and peaceful protesters. I was not sure whether the Minister said that the issue of executions, beheadings and crucifixions would be raised with the Crown Prince. May I ask that it is, and specifically the issue of the juveniles who have been on death row for many years—Ali al-Nimr, Dawoud al-Marhoon and Abdullah al-Zaher?

Alistair Burt: I made clear to the House a moment ago the United Kingdom’s feelings about the death penalty—that the issue is raised, that it is not our policy, and that it is not a policy that we support in any state. We have raised the case of the minors, seeking a situation where they might not be executed. That matter remains very much a matter of concern to the United Kingdom, which is why we talk about it publicly and raise it privately as well.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It was self-evident earlier that Houthis propaganda has been remarkably effective. Is there anything we could learn from that?

Alistair Burt: I defer to my right hon. Friend in his knowledge of propaganda and how it might be used. I am not sure whose voices are listened to most in relation to this matter. As the Houthis are not a state, because of history, it has been very easy to target the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in this case. A more comprehensive picture of the conflict would perhaps lead to different conclusions.
The conclusion, however, that we all want the conflict to end, so that there can be a durable peace and better security for the people of Yemen, who deserve better governance than they have had for some decades, is a matter of importance to us all.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): In the last month there has been huge disruption in access for international aid into Yemen’s ports on the Red sea. Given that that is primarily caused by Saudi Arabian blockades, will the Minister ensure that it is the context for a ceasefire, does the UK believe that Iran was imposed in December, and we shall do all we can. We wanted to give the assurance that we would do all we can, through the UN, to bring an end to this conflict. Military pressure on a Houthi insurgency has been part of that process, but clearly, as we have said before, we do not see a military solution to this; we see a process leading to negotiations and an end to the conflict as soon as possible.

Alistair Burt: I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that I gave the House a moment ago. The restrictions were imposed because of the Saudis’ quite legitimate concerns that weapons, or weapons parts, that are directed against them are smuggled into Yemen. We wanted to give the assurance that we would do all we could to try to prevent that, and that in the process the restrictions on ships coming in could be eased. We have seen an easing of those restrictions. The ports are now open. Fifty ships have docked since the restrictions were imposed in December, and we shall do all we can.1 The United Kingdom has taken a leading part, both in reassuring the coalition about the direction of missiles towards it, and in making the point about the crucial and urgent need for both commercial and humanitarian aid to enter Yemen.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): In seeking to explore the context for a ceasefire, does the UK believe that Iran has broken any United Nations sanctions?

Alistair Burt: Yes; I thank my hon. Friend for the question. The UN panel of experts held very clearly, within recent weeks, that Iran had not been able to demonstrate that it had abided by UN resolution 2216, which is about the availability of weapons going to Yemen. That was what caused concern about the breach of UN sanctions. It emphasises again external interest in Yemen. That should also come to an end as part of a comprehensive peace agreement.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Over the past 24 hours, my inbox has been flooded by messages from constituents who want to see a ceasefire in Yemen, and the Minister has just said a number of times that the Government want an end to the conflict in Yemen. How does he square that circle, though, when this Government have a concern around the attitude to freedom of religion—people’s right to practise their own faith in Yemen. That should also come to an end as part of a comprehensive peace agreement.

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Alistair Burt

first-class team and is representative of a first-class
team throughout the region, which I have the honour to
represent.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): On a point of
order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I gather it relates to the exchanges that
have just taken place.

Rebecca Pow: I would like to put it on record, for
clarification, that I went on a delegation to Saudi Arabia.
I want to be quite clear about that.

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for
putting that on the record. The House will appreciate it.

Blagging: Leveson Inquiry

1.31 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab) (Urgent
Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Digital,
Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement
on the allegations of blagging at The Sunday Times and
the relevance of these to the Leveson public inquiry.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and
Sport (Matt Hancock): This morning we saw reports in
the media of a potential fraud and data protection
breach by a former private investigator. The allegations
are of behaviour that appears totally unacceptable and
potentially criminal. Investigation is therefore a matter
for the police, and the House will understand that there
is only so far that I can go in discussing the specific
details and allegations.

More broadly, some people have already formed the
conclusion that this revelation should require us to
change policy on press regulation. Policy, of course,
should always be based on all available information. It
is worth noting that the activity described apparently
stopped around 2010, before the establishment of the
Leveson inquiry. Indeed, it was precisely because of
such cases that the Leveson inquiry was set up. This sort
of behaviour was covered by the terms of reference of
that inquiry, and Mr Ford’s activities were raised as part
of the inquiry.

As we discussed in the House last week, and again on
Monday, there have been three detailed police investigations.
A wide range of offences were examined; over 40 people
were convicted, and many went to prison. Today’s
revelations, if proven, are clearly already covered by the
law and appear to be in contravention of section 55 of
the Data Protection Act 1998. As described, they would
also appear to be in contravention of the new Data
Protection Bill that is currently before the House.

What is more, the fact that this activity stopped in
2010 underlines the point that the world has changed.
Practices such as these have been investigated. Newspapers
today are in a very different position from when the
alleged offences took place. That view is in fact strengthened
by today’s example, because the behaviour that we have
discovered today was from before the Leveson inquiry,
and existing law is in place to deal with it. Criminal
behaviour should be dealt with by the police and the
courts, and anyone who has committed a criminal offence
should face the full force of the law.

The future of a vibrant, free and independent press
matters to us all. We are committed to protecting it. We
want to see the highest standards, and we must face the
challenges of today to ensure that Britain has high-quality
journalism and high-quality discourse to underpin our
democracy for the years to come.

Tom Watson: I refer to my entry in the register.

The world has not changed. The “one rogue blagger”
defence—it has been uttered from the mouth of the
Secretary of State. When he announced last week that
he was dropping the Leveson inquiry, the Culture Secretary
said he was doing so because the inquiry
“looked into everything in this area, and it was followed by three police investigations...We looked into these things as a society. We had a comprehensive Leveson inquiry.”—[Official Report, 1 March 2018; Vol. 636, c. 974.]

He told us that the matter was closed—there was nothing more to see. Well, overnight, the BBC has reported allegations by another whistleblower, John Ford, who says that he was a blagger for The Sunday Times for 15 years—a newspaper that the Secretary of State did not even mention.

Mr Ford claimed that he obtained private bank and mortgage information about Cabinet members and public figures. He says that his activity for the paper was illegal, intrusive and ultimately wrong. In his evidence to the first half of the public inquiry, Times editor John Witherow, who then edited The Sunday Times, conceded that Ford had worked for the paper, but did not reveal that he had done so for over a decade. Today, The Sunday Times has disputed the new claims.

The second half of the Leveson inquiry could establish where the truth lies. That is what it was set up to do, but the Government are closing down the public inquiry before it has done its work, despite Sir Brian Leveson saying that he fundamentally disagrees with that decision, along with 130,000 concerned citizens who said it should go ahead and whom the Secretary of State has chosen to disregard. He is capitulating to the press barons, who want to use their raw power to close down a national public inquiry. In the light of the new allegations, will he reconsider his decision on the public inquiry into illegality in the press? If not, how will he assure the House and the public that these new allegations of criminal behaviour by The Sunday Times will be fully investigated? Is it not now clear to him that too many questions remain unanswered to justify the decision to break David Cameron’s solemn promise to the victims of press abuse?

Matt Hancock: I think I covered all those questions in my statement. As I mentioned, not only did the Leveson inquiry have terms of reference that covered this type of allegation, but this person was raised at the Leveson inquiry. As the hon. Gentleman implied, it is of course a matter for the police to follow up any evidence of criminal wrongdoing. He also asked whether we should therefore bring in an inquiry that is backward-looking and bring in rules that would help to undermine further the free press that we need, notably section 40.

The answer to both those questions last week was clearly no, and this new evidence, of activity that it appears took place up to 2010—therefore, up to seven years ago—is not a reason to reopen decisions that were taken exactly on the basis that the world has changed. If anything, this evidence demonstrates further how much things have changed.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I was Justice Secretary when we set up the Leveson inquiry and when we promised the second stage of the inquiry, so my right hon. Friend will not be surprised to discover that I share some of Sir Brian Leveson and other people’s disappointment that the second-stage inquiry was postponed. Does my right hon. Friend really think that the second half of the inquiry could establish where the truth lies? That is what it was set up to do, but the Government are closing down the public inquiry before it has done its work, despite Sir Brian Leveson saying that he fundamentally disagrees with that decision, along with 130,000 concerned citizens who said it should go ahead and whom the Secretary of State has chosen to disregard. He is capitulating to the press barons, who want to use their raw power to close down a national public inquiry.

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Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Clearly these new reports are worrying and only add to the serious concerns that many of us across the House have about the behaviour of the press. Scottish National party Members have always said that individuals should be able to seek redress when they feel they have been the victim of press malpractice, and it benefits every one of us to have a media that is both transparent and accountable.

I repeat that if Leveson 2 is to be set up, the Scottish Government must be consulted and Scotland’s distinct legal system recognised. In those circumstances, we would support efforts to establish a new UK-wide press inquiry. What action, if any, is the Secretary of State proposing to take on these new allegations? Can he guarantee that if an inquiry is established, it would happen only after consultation with the Scottish Government and would take into account and respect Scotland’s distinct legal system?

Matt Hancock: Of course I respect the constitutional settlement. Action is necessary as a result of these revelations, and it is action for the police into allegations of what appear to be criminal activities.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): The Secretary of State is right to say that criminality is a matter for the police, but does he feel that the Information Commissioner, who has the right to investigate breaches of personal data, has all the power she needs? Is he listening to her calls to further strengthen her powers through the Data Protection Bill?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. We have a good working relationship with the Information Commissioner. Her powers are being strengthened by the Data Protection Bill, and I am sure that the level to which and the ways in which they are strengthened will be properly scrutinised as the Bill goes through Committee and further stages.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I urge the Secretary of State to stop trying to hide behind the Leveson inquiry, because the man who was responsible
for that inquiry says he fundamentally disagrees with him. In the remarkable letter he wrote to the Secretary of State, he said:

“I have no doubt that there is still a legitimate expectation on behalf of the public and, in particular, the alleged victims of phone hacking and other unlawful conduct, that there will be a full public examination of the circumstances that allowed that behaviour to develop and clear reassurances that nothing of the same scale could occur again”.

That is the point. Of course the police can look into specific instances, but the question Sir Brian is posing is: what was the culture that allowed those practices to happen, and how can we have reassurance that that culture has changed? How can we have that reassurance without a Leveson 2 inquiry?

**Matt Hancock:** Not only has there already been a Leveson inquiry into those areas, but the culture has clearly changed, and the fact that these practices ended in 2010 underlines the fact that they are historical. What we now have to address is how we ensure that there is high-quality journalism in the years to come, rather than revisiting the time when the right hon. Gentleman was at the height of his powers.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that revelations of blagging by private investigators employed by newspapers have been known about ever since Operation Motorman and the subsequent report by the Information Commissioner, which was more than 10 years ago and led to prosecutions and convictions? He is absolutely right that newspapers today face real challenges, and it is those that we should be looking into through the inquiry that the Government have set up, rather than revisiting events of a decade ago.

**Matt Hancock:** It was a great pleasure to serve in government with my right hon. Friend, who preceded me in this job. He has great wisdom in this area and understands the challenges faced in having a high-quality media with high-quality journalism that must behave appropriately and ensuring that people have redress, such as in the low-cost arbitration system that now exists. He put a lot of work into putting all of that into place, and I pay tribute to him and agree with what he said.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The thing is, we heard time and time again that it was just one rogue reporter and one rogue newspaper, and then that it was just one rogue company. We now learn, because of civil actions that people have had to put their homes in danger to be able to take, and because of revelations last night, that it was very extensive, including *The Sunday Times*, which thus far has always denied any involvement in this kind of activity. Last week, the Secretary of State said that he hoped there would be improvements to the press complaints system. What improvements would he like to see?

**Matt Hancock:** I want the low-cost arbitration system that has been put in place by the Independent Press Standards Organisation to work. At the moment, we have not seen a full case go through it. It has just been put in place, in November, and I want to see it work better. I want to make sure that when wrong decisions are made, there is a proper acknowledgment of and apology for that.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Those who believe in a truly free press should not accept IPSO, and those who do not believe in a truly free press cannot accept it either. In the light of these criminal confessions, which only *The Guardian* and the BBC reported, does my right hon. Friend agree that implementing section 40 would be more in the spirit of building a country that works for everyone than the current system, whereby only the very rich can challenge the press?

**Matt Hancock:** I have a lot of time for my hon. Friend. Making sure the country works for everyone means making sure we have a press that can investigate people and cannot be put off such investigations by the threat of costs, even if everything they report is accurate. Therefore, I think that section 40 is not appropriate, but it is important that we have proper redress through IPSO, which has recently brought in a new system, and, as I said in my previous response, I would like to see that working.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) will go about his business with an additional glint in his eye and spring in his step as a result of enjoying the approbation of no less a figure than the Secretary of State.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State agree that as well as being criminal, the behaviour described by John Ford would be actionable in civil law? If section 40 were enforced, it would be of considerable benefit to any member of the public who was a potential claimant, particularly if the publisher of *The Sunday Times* were held to be vicariously liable for the criminal and civilly actionable behaviour.

**Matt Hancock:** The hon. and learned Lady has demonstrated just how much this is a matter for the courts and potentially criminal. She raises the issue of civil action. That is how in this country we deal with misdoing such as this that is potentially criminal.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that if the allegations published are true, they would be criminal acts and could be prosecuted today, without any recourse to either Leveson 2 or indeed any other inquiry? If there is a concern about access to funds, might Mr Mosley and his supporters fund such an action?

**Matt Hancock:** Certainly the allegations we have read about are potentially criminal, and dealing with that is a matter not for Ministers but, rightly, for the police.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): Hundreds of thousands of the British people, Lord Leveson and now the revelations from Mr Ford have made it clear that this matter is not closed, which might lead the public to ask: what is there to hide? Why will the Secretary of State not just let Leveson 2 take place, so that he can once and for all put a line under it and show that, as he attests, the world has indeed moved on?
Matt Hancock: Because I am concentrating on what we need for the future, not on what happened more than seven years ago.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): The Sunday Times blagging revelations are deeply disquieting, but they are historical. Can my right hon. Friend assure me and the victims of press intrusion, in particular those who face it in times of bereavement, that the new model of regulation introduced since the Leveson inquiry makes such activities much less likely and that there are proper sanctions in place?

Matt Hancock: Not only is that what is in place, but it is what must be in place. Ensuring that that happens and that, at the same time, the free press is protected and standards are protected is extremely important.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Secretary of State tells us that the world has changed. May I remind him that when the Press Council was set up we were assured the world had changed, and then when the Press Complaints Commission was set up we were assured the world had changed? We do not know it has changed; we do not know that this action stopped with the Leveson inquiry. Perhaps the only way we would know was if we had Leveson 2. Will he reconsider having Leveson 2?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady tries to argue that things are not different from seven years ago. The challenges facing the press are different, but the polity is also different. We have legislative changes in the rules for the police—we have a new police code of ethics—and on the press side, we have a wholly new regulator. The idea that things are the same as they were is undermined by the fact that this is historical activity, not recent activity.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): A free and independent press, especially local press, is a pillar of our democracy. It is vital that the press adhere to the highest ethical and journalistic standards and that any criminal allegations are fully investigated, and it is also vital that that freedom is preserved and respected. It is a difficult balance to strike, but will my right hon. Friend reassure me that it is exactly that difficult balance that he and his predecessors have consistently sought to strike?

Matt Hancock: That is right—as well as always facing the challenges that are in front of us now. The idea that we should put at risk hundreds more local newspapers, over and above the 200 that have shut since 2005, is anathema to me, because it is so important that our local press is supported. People who support the implementation of section 40 support ending the ability of the local press to investigate people locally and, ultimately, are undermining those businesses.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): If the allegations by John Ford are proved to be true, it means not only that there has been a serious abuse of power by major newspapers for over a decade, but that John Withrow—then the editor of The Sunday Times, and now the editor of The Times—was only partially truthful in his evidence to the Leveson inquiry. How will the Secretary of State ensure that the full truth is finally revealed?

Matt Hancock: As the hon. Lady knows, if the allegations are to be investigated, that is a matter for the police. They will therefore look into these allegations, and that is the right place for that to happen.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I should declare that among the allegations printed in The Guardian, it is alleged that Mr Ford worked for The Telegraph, my former employer. Is it not itself a demonstration of how much the culture has changed that our newspapers are reporting on these historical allegations and, furthermore, that we have a regulator that provides the low-cost arbitration that would give victims the redress the Opposition claim they need so desperately?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is spot-on. There is a group of people in this House right now who are interested in the past, and there is a group interested in the future, and I am firmly interested in making sure we have decent, high-quality journalism for the future.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Father of the House is completely right that the press would not allow other institutions or organisations to be judged against such a low bar. Why is the Secretary of State satisfied that the press are not being judged against the sort of bar they would judge other people against?

Matt Hancock: These are allegations of criminal behaviour that are printed in a newspaper—a newspaper that supported the approach we took on Thursday—so they are being printed in the media and discussed in this House. Allegations of criminal behaviour should of course be dealt with properly by the police in the normal way.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Leveson 2 would not only be very costly and lengthy, but might undermine the freedom of our press, be disproportionate and, given that newspapers’ circulation has been declining while digital media consumption has been increasing, be too narrow?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is quite right: we have to make sure that we have in place vibrant high-quality journalism and a free press that can hold the powerful to account. Some people may not like that, but it is an incredibly important part of having high-quality political discourse and, ultimately, liberal democracy as we know it. That is what we are focused on.

My hon. Friend mentions the costs, which I had not even come on to. The potential cost of another Leveson inquiry is estimated to be about £5 million. I think that is money better spent ensuring there is a sustainable future for high-quality journalism.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State says it is not desirable to look at the events of the past because the Department is focusing its efforts on fake news and clickbait. Why can we not do both?

Matt Hancock: We have already had a full investigation, through Leveson, of what happened. The question now is what we do next.
Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Not only is the Secretary of State’s fig-leaf excuse that the world has changed wrong, but it ignores the fact that the delay in part 2 was always built into the inquiry to allow police investigations to take place. The Sunday Times revelations show that evidence is there to be investigated. Does not his wilful refusal to allow the inquiry to proceed just make it look as though he and the media have something to hide?

Matt Hancock: No. The hon. Gentleman says that this morning’s evidence shows that there needs to be further investigation. This is of course why we have the police to investigate and, if necessary, the courts to ensure that justice is done.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The Secretary of State stated at the start that policy must “be based on all available information”, but how can that possibly happen if there is no second stage of the inquiry, as has been recommended, so will he stop contradicting himself and get on with the job?

Matt Hancock: It is very hard to add anything more to the fact that there will be an investigation if the police deem the allegations of what appears to be criminal behaviour to be criminal behaviour. The point is that that is a matter for the police in this country, not for Ministers.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about these being historical events, but of course the victims of the latest hack found out about it only yesterday, and may not even know about it at the moment, so that is not very historical. Sir Brian Leveson wrote a letter to the Secretary of State saying that matters had not yet been fully considered and that we needed the second part of the inquiry. Why does he think he knows better than Sir Brian Leveson?

Matt Hancock: I have of course considered all the relevant evidence, including the representations from Sir Brian, and my judgment is that we need to concentrate on making sure we have sustainable, high-quality journalism in the future. The hon. Gentleman says that these matters are current, not historical, but the activities alleged in newspapers and by the BBC this morning are ones that they say ended in 2010, which means they are indeed historical.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State not understand why I and my colleagues find it slightly odd that he should decline an inquiry on the basis that these things happened before 2010? By that logic, we would never have had the Iraq inquiry, the child abuse inquiry or the Bloody Sunday inquiry. By definition, inquiries examine events that have happened in the past.

Matt Hancock: We have had an inquiry that investigated what happened in the past. It cost millions of pounds: a total of £48 million was spent, including on the police investigations. There were three separate police investigations and over 40 convictions. The issue of the gentleman mentioned this morning was raised in the Leveson inquiry. The idea that we need to have a new inquiry is actually undermined by today’s revelations, rather than supported. What matters is that we look forward to making sure that we have high-quality journalism and sustainable business models for it in the future.
Points of Order

1.58 pm

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In an oral statement on social care on 7 December 2017, the then care Minister, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price)—as it happens, she is in her place on the Front Bench at the moment—replied to a question I asked about the Government abandoning the carers strategy, which had been due to be published in summer 2017. Of the thousands of carers who had responded to a consultation and then been left waiting, the Minister said:

“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.”—[Official Report, 7 December 2017; Vol. 632, c. 1238-39.]

It is now March, and this is the second time I have raised this on a point of order. Not only do we no longer have any prospect of a carers strategy from the Government, but they have not met their own target to publish an action plan. That is a shabby way to treat carers. Mr Speaker, have you had any indication that the current Minister for Care or, indeed, any Health Minister plans to come to the House to update us on what, if anything, the Government propose to do for carers?

Mr Speaker: I have certainly not been advised of any intention on the part of a Minister to make an oral or, indeed, written statement to the House. There is a Health Minister on the Treasury Bench, who has heard what the hon. Lady said. She is welcome to respond if she wishes, but is under no obligation to do so.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the oral statement on social care on 7 December 2017, the then care Minister, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price)—as it happens, she is in her place on the Front Bench at the moment—replied to a question I asked about the Government abandoning the carers strategy, which had been due to be published in summer 2017. Of the thousands of carers who had responded to a consultation and then been left waiting, the Minister said:

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Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At Prime Minister’s Question Time on 31 January, I asked for a meeting with a Minister and was promised that I could have one. I received a letter two or three weeks ago saying that the matter had been passed to the Department of Health and Social Care. I seek your guidance—or anyone’s guidance, really—on how I can progress that, because I have had no meeting and no date so far. That was five weeks ago, so I think I have been fairly patient.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has certainly been patient. Sometimes, raising a point of order in the Chamber and reminding those on the Treasury Bench of a promised meeting that has not yet been delivered can be a remarkably effective way of bringing about said meeting. The other device that I recommend to the hon. Lady, who is a new Member of the House, is the tabling of a written question. If she is interested in exploring historic copies of the Official Report, she will know that the former Member for Manchester, Gorton, our late and dear friend Sir Gerald Kaufman, was fond of highlighting unanswered correspondence to which he demanded a reply, unanswered questions to which he demanded a reply, or undelivered meetings that he had been promised and on which he still insisted by tabling written questions to remind Ministers of those matters and inquire when the promised reply or meeting would take place. In my experience, Sir Gerald was remarkably effective at obtaining such responses, as indeed was the former Member for Walsall North, Mr David Winnick. The hon. Lady may usefully learn from their and many other examples.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In January, the Government announced plans to incentivise local communities to agree to explore the possibility of storing radioactive nuclear waste near their homes—an initiative that was widely reported in the media. I was anxious that it could revive proposals to store nuclear waste in the anhydrite mine under thousands of homes in Billingham in my constituency. I raised the issue at Prime Minister's questions on 31 January. Sadly, the Prime Minister’s substitute that day, the Minister for the Cabinet Office, despite the publicity and it being Government policy, knew nothing about that initiative by his Government. However, he promised to investigate the matter and write to me. That was five weeks ago. Will you advise me whether it is unreasonable of me to have expected an answer by now?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his courtesy in giving me notice of it. It is not unreasonable for an hon. Member to expect a response from Ministers within five weeks. Ministerial correspondence is of course, as colleagues...
will know, the responsibility of the Minister concerned. The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), who happens to be my constituency neighbour, is normally most courteous. I am sure that his colleagues on the Treasury Bench, including the representatives of the Patronage Secretary, will swiftly alert the right hon. Gentleman to this outstanding action. The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) certainly should have had a reply and he should now get one, sooner rather than later. Meanwhile, he has placed his concern on the record.

Local Health Scrutiny

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

2.5 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about health scrutiny by local authorities, including scrutiny of clinical commissioning groups’ decisions; and for connected purposes.

The Health and Social Care Act 2012 introduced radical changes to the way in which healthcare was organised. Gone were the days of large primary care trusts and regional health authorities, and in came smaller, more focused, doctor-led clinical commissioning groups and, with each clinical commissioning group, a so-called accountable officer.

There are 207 CCGs in England. They are responsible for two thirds of all NHS spending, controlling £73.6 billion of taxpayers’ money. Decisions taken by CCGs affect elective hospital services, emergency and urgent care, community care and mental health support services. The principle of clinical commissioning groups—ensuring that the health services in our communities reflect the needs of our communities—is, on the face of it, sensible. However, as with all providers of public services and spenders of public money, they should be accountable to the public they seek to serve and the decisions they make should be available for public scrutiny. That is what the Bill seeks to achieve.

The present system of public scrutiny for decisions by clinical commissioning groups is opaque, cumbersome and impenetrable to most. It is all bound up in regulation 23(9) of the Local Authority (Public Health, Health and Wellbeing Boards and Health Scrutiny) Regulations 2013, which sets out that local authorities can refer decisions of clinical commissioning groups to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care where they believe that proper consultation on a service has not taken place or where they consider that “the proposal would not be in the interests of the health service in its area.”

This all sounds very good, but in reality it is a “take it or leave it” scenario. Local authorities and their elected membership are not empowered to do anything other than accept a decision or escalate it straight to the Secretary of State. That binary approach does not make for good scrutiny, nor does it allow councillors and local authorities to be involved in helping CCGs to make better long-term decisions.

That is not the only flaw in the current scrutiny system. Should a local authority make a referral to the Secretary of State, it is immediately referred to the Independent Reconfiguration Panel. However, since 2013 only 18 referrals have been received. The last four referrals, which were from Thurrock, Cumbria, the East Riding of Yorkshire and my own city of Stoke-on-Trent, saw almost a year pass between the referral to the Secretary of State being received and the report from the Independent Reconfiguration Panel being published. I am sure we would all agree that that is a totally unacceptable wait, during which clinical commissioning groups are free to implement the decision they have
taken despite it being subject to a referral. I do not believe anyone would see that scrutiny process as fair or robust.

The Bill seeks to impose a 45-day time limit between a referral being received by the Secretary of State and the Independent Reconfiguration Panel making a report. Crucially, it also seeks to put any decision referred to the Secretary of State on hold until such time as the Independent Reconfiguration Panel has made its deliberations. The Bill would go further by granting local authorities a new power to call in decisions of CCGs to their local health scrutiny committee and to compel accountable officers to properly consider the views of councillors before progressing with decisions. That would be no different from the mechanisms councils already have to challenge decisions regarding public health, which have been a function of local government since 2013.

Nowhere would that new power have been more welcome than in my own city of Stoke-on-Trent. For over two years now, the north Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent CCGs have been pursuing a flawed and deeply unpopular plan for decommissioning and closing community care beds. Beds in Longton Cottage Hospital, Bradwell Hospital, Leek Moorlands Hospital, Cheadle Hospital and Haywood Hospital have all been lost—more than 200 in total. A referral to the Secretary of State of the disastrous “My Care, My Way, Home First” plan, dreamt up by the accountable officer, Marcus Warnes, was proposed by Stoke-on-Trent City Council, Staffordshire County Council, Staffordshire Moorlands District Council and Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council, but the referral took almost a year to be considered. I want to thank city councillor Joan Bell and county councillors Dave Jones and Charlotte Atkins, formerly of this place, for their help in achieving those referrals from the county and city councils.

During that year-long wait, however, Marcus Warnes carried on implementing the plan and closing much-needed community care beds. When the final report came back from the independent reconfiguration panel, it was scathing about the process. It said:

“The bed modelling presented in September 2015 has proved entirely incorrect and misleading.”

It also said:

“The circumstances of the NHS’s original decision not to consult about the closure of the Longton Hospital beds are unclear.”

The reconfiguration panel also said of Marcus Warnes’ consultation:

“It did not include any meaningful reference to the impact on community beds and hospitals.”

Frankly, Madam Deputy Speaker, if you or I, or for that matter any local councillor, was the subject of a report suggesting we had misled the public in the way we spent taxpayers’ money, we would be out of a job. I see no reason why Marcus Warnes should be any different. Rather than lose his job, however, he was appointed, against the wishes of the local authorities, as the single accountable officer for the whole of Staffordshire: a huge amount of power concentrated into an entirely unaccountable individual. In Staffordshire’s case, absolute power is leading to absolute chaos. Last week, 150 members of the Staffordshire “Care for All” campaign, led by Andy Day of the North Staffordshire Pensioners’ Convention, came to Parliament to press their case against community bed closures, because they do not have faith that the current scrutiny system is working.

That is just one example from Staffordshire, but there are many more, such as the botched privatisation of council care programmes and the CCG continuing to fine our local hospital millions of pounds for missed targets. Away from Stoke-on-Trent, there are other examples. My hon. Friend the shadow Health Secretary exposed last week how 44 CCGs were paying GPs a bonus not to refer people to hospital. That is an example of CCGs implementing dangerous policies on the NHS without proper scrutiny or public support. Cash incentives based on how many referrals GPs make should have no place in patient care and should never be used.

Such practices should be blocked, and that is why the Bill is necessary. It will provide local accountability for the decisions that are taken by CCGs. It will provide new scrutiny powers to democratically elected councillors to rein in unaccountable CCG chief officers. It will ensure that local NHS services are scrutinised in the same way as council-provided public health services. The Bill will come too late to challenge the decisions in north Staffordshire or to support the 17 referrals that came before it, but it could help to ensure that future decisions by all CCGs are genuinely in the interests of the communities they are there to serve. There is still a lot more to do to return genuine accountability to the NHS, but the Bill would be a start.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Gareth Snell, Layla Moran, Jack Brereton, Jeremy Lefroy, Diana Johnson, Rosie Cooper, Mike Gapes and Ruth Smeeth present the Bill.

Gareth Snell accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 July, and to be printed (Bill 178).
There is an alternative reading that article 50 extinguishes all rights of the individual created by the founding treaties. In that case, both EU and international law would demand that a treaty be negotiated on associate Union citizenship, bringing with it a bundle of rights that might be little different from those that come with full citizenship. One way or other, we believe that EU citizenship of a sort is required.

The EU could legislate on citizenship post Brexit. That legislation would protect UK nationals in the EU, but would have no binding effect on the UK—by definition, because we would have left. We therefore urge the Government to look to achieving continuity and associate citizenship through the withdrawal agreement. That is why today’s debate is particularly timely.

The report concludes that neither continuity nor associate citizenship would require any revision of the founding treaties. There is a great deal more detail in the report that I will not go into today, but it will become pertinent if the Government recognise the force of our argument and proceed as we recommend. For now, I wish to set the context for our party’s position and say plainly from the start that Plaid Cymru campaigned to stay in the European Union. This was consistent with our long-term pro-European policy—indeed, that has been our policy since our establishment in 1925.

We have always been aware of our European history and our nation’s European heritage and have set great store by it. That has influenced our party profoundly. Our long-time president, Gwynfor Evans, who was the Member for Carmarthen, would rarely miss the opportunity to remind the people of Wales of our European heritage and our 1,500-year history as a people with our own language and culture, from our immediate post-Roman beginnings onwards to the present day. In fact, his conference speeches would often consist of retelling our history. I am reminded of a small joke made by two valleys members during one of Gwynfor’s speeches. One said to the other, “Good God, this is 20 minutes in and we are only in the 9th century!”

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): My hon. Friend is making his usual excellent case when he leads these debates. We could go even further back to Saunders Lewis, who was the President before Gwynfor Evans. Saunders saw our European heritage as vital to his vision for Wales for the future, partly driven by his time in the trenches in the first world war and his desire not to see another generation of Welshmen die in the fields of foreign lands.

Hywel Williams: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I was going to refer later to the fact that the European Union has helped largely to prevent war on the European continents, although there are obvious exceptions, such as in the former Yugoslavia, which was not a member of the EU. He makes a pertinent point about Saunders Lewis, who had that profound experience in the trenches. It was one reason why he and his friends set up Plaid Cymru in August 1925 in my home town of Prestel, at a meeting of the Eisteddfod. While I am on my feet, I might as well say that our profound lack of political realism at that time meant that in a country that was almost exclusively non-conformist, teetotal and in favour of the British empire, we had as our president a Francophile, wine-drinking Catholic—I think

Opposition Day

[UN-ALLOCATED DAY]

European Union Citizenship

2.15 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House supports the maintenance of European Union citizenship rights for Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish and English citizens; notes that the range of rights and protections afforded to individuals as European Union citizens are integral to a person’s European identity; further notes that many of those rights are closely linked to the UK’s membership of the Single Market; and calls on the UK Government to ensure that the UK’s membership of the Single Market and UK citizens’ right to European Union citizenship are retained in the event that the UK leaves the EU.

Before I begin, may I apologise to the House? I have a very bad head cold that has rendered me slightly deaf, although that is perhaps no great disadvantage in this place. I caution any Member who intervenes that I might have some difficulty hearing them.

Our motion calls for UK nationals to retain European citizenship after we leave the European Union. The key word here is “retain”: we wish to retain what we already have. It is supported by a wide range of organisations and individuals: the Scottish National party, the Liberal Democrats, the Green party, Open Britain, Best for Britain, the European Movement, The New European, Cymru Dros Ewrop—Wales for Europe, New Europeans, Our Future Our Choice, Brand EU, UKtoStay.EU and Another Europe is Possible, as well as Jo Maugham, QC, of the Good Law Project, and Professor Volker Roeben and Dr Pedro Telles, two of the authors of a report on EU citizenship commissioned by my good friend Jill Evans, the Plaid Cymru MEP. Since the referendum, they have been arguing consistently for the retention of EU citizenship, and I recommend the report to anyone who wishes to pursue this argument. To the relief of hard-pressed Members, I can say that the executive summary is very good.

The crux of our argument is that although we are leaving the EU, the European citizenship rights conferred on UK citizens are not extinguished. Although we are leaving the Single Market, the UK and the EU itself post Brexit, and rights continue, is supported by the overriding objective of international law. I refer Members to the 1969 Vienna convention on the law of treaties, which will be binding on member states, the UK and the EU itself post Brexit. Article 70(1)(b) of that convention provides that “legal situations” created during the currency of the treaties continue after withdrawal.

As Professor Roeben et al say on page five of the report:

“This interpretation of the Convention, that ongoing situations and rights continue, is supported by the overriding objective of ensuring legal certainty and preventing withdrawals from treaties having any retroactive effect. It is also supported by state practice.”

That is a crucial aspect of international law. Governments withdrawing from treaties cannot just abandon the rights their citizens already have. Professor Roeben tells me, by the way, that in this article, as with much international law, was drawn up with the prominent participation of British legal experts.

Another Europe is Possible, as well as Jo Maugham, QC, of the Good Law Project, and Professor Volker Roeben and Dr Pedro Telles, two of the authors of a report on EU citizenship commissioned by my good friend Jill Evans, the Plaid Cymru MEP. Since the referendum, they have been arguing consistently for the retention of EU citizenship, and I recommend the report to anyone who wishes to pursue this argument. To the relief of hard-pressed Members, I can say that the executive summary is very good.

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Machiavelli is still rotating in his grave after that one, but there we are. The roots of our pro-European stance are very deep indeed.

**Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Given that the hon. Gentleman’s party exists for the fundamental purpose of trying to remove British citizenship from the people of Wales—something that is of significantly more importance to them than their European identity—is his argument not a bit inconsistent?

**Hywel Williams:** I can only say, frankly, that my ambition and that of my hon. Friends is to ensure that Wales has an independent future. That may mean that we are reconciled to a British identity as a multiple identity for now, and hon. Members will know all about this—one can allegedly be Welsh and British, which is an argument that I hear from Members on both sides of the House, or Welsh and European, which is our argument. I certainly feel Welsh and European.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): This goes to the crux of the argument. We are talking about our rights as individuals and the identity of individuals. I was a Londoner born and bred. I live in Wales and I claim Welsh nationality, and I am also proud of being European, but our rights as individuals are under threat. That is the point we have brought to the Chamber.

**Hywel Williams:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I was going to go on to say that this is more than just a matter of self-ascribed identity. It is about the real practical matters of the rights to travel and work—the European rights that have benefited people in Wales and throughout the UK. There is an argument about identity, and I will talk about that in a moment, but I do not think that it has the force that the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) seemed to imply.

I was talking about Gwynfor Evans, who would often remind us of three pillars of Owain Glyndŵr’s policy during the 15th-century war of independence, as related to the King of France in the Pennal letter, which some people will have seen when it was on a visit to Aberystwyth some years ago. He said to the King of France that one of the central pillars was the need for a direct relationship with Rome for the Church in Wales—it was a very long time ago, and that was important then. It was about a direct relationship with the overarching European institution, rather than an indirect link mediated through Canterbury—some people will hear the echoes of the current situation in that policy.

By the way, the other two pillars of Glyndŵr’s policy were for Welsh to be the state language and for two universities to be established at a time when they were first being established across Europe by ambitious leaders. Some 600 years later, we have excellent universities in Wales. We are nearly there on the language issue, but on the European issue we are taking a serious step back.

From the start, my party took inspiration from continental developments of economic and social co-operation, as exemplified in the writings of D. J. Davies. We found European multilingualism far more congenial than the stifling monolingualism of so much of the UK’s public life. I say in passing that right hon. and hon. Members may not know that the most recent meeting of the Welsh Grand Committee was held here in Westminster with simultaneous translation. Half those who spoke did so partly or wholly in Welsh. No one was hurt. Revolution did not break out. Hansard published what I think is its very first wholly bilingual record—I should mention that the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) spoke in Welsh, and I congratulate him sincerely on his efforts—but that reflection of the actual linguistic condition common in these islands is still very much the remarked-upon exception, rather than the rule. That is not so over much of the rest of our continent.

Turning to present times, given our radical political stance, Plaid Cymru has always supported the growth and development of European policies beyond the narrow confines of the common market, which we initially joined. Ordinary people across the UK have derived so much benefit from those social, workforce and environmental policies, and EU citizenship is, for me, in that category. Importantly for our country, the EU has an overt regional economic cohesion policy, from which Wales has derived substantial additional funding. Of course, it is a cruel irony that we benefit thus only because of our poverty and our economy performing so badly, on a par with regions of the former Soviet bloc at the eastern end of the European Union.

In passing, I must also refer to other EU measures such as Interreg Europe, which promotes inter-regional contact between Wales and Ireland. Wales faces west as well as east, although many people, including Government Ministers, sometimes do not realise that. My colleague, the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), used to say occasionally that Holyhead was east Dublin rather than north-west Anglesey. We have also benefited from the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme and the Erasmus programme on student exchange, to name just three from which Wales along with other parts of the UK has benefited, and in respect of which, I say to the Minister, there is much concern, not least at our universities, and I mention my own, Bangor University.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): While the hon. Gentleman is on that subject, does he agree that it would be useful if the Government made an estimate of the amount of money that would have come to Wales from the European regional development fund and the European social fund in the 2021-27 tranche and promised that Wales will still receive the same amount of money or more?

**Hywel Williams:** I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman. As with so many things Welsh, we lack the basic statistical information and the basic projections. I know that the Government do not believe in experts, projections and forecasts, but I sometimes wonder on what they do depend. In Rome, they depended on examining the entrails of sacrificed animals—I do not know whether it is what they get up to—but he makes a serious point: if we knew what we were dealing with, we could make the argument more effectively.

**Jonathan Edwards:** I am glad that my hon. Friend mentions Erasmus and Horizon, two schemes whereby the Welsh Government could act bilaterally with the EU. Does he share my concern, arising from my discussions with colleagues in Brussels, that the Scottish Government seem far in advance of the Welsh Government in negotiating with the EU how those schemes could be continued in our respective nations?
Hywel Williams: That is a very good point. We have examined the bilateral agreements that other countries have with the EU. The Brexit Select Committee, of which I am a member, recently had the Swiss ambassador to the EU and Swiss experts before it discussing these bilateral agreements, and they are extremely useful for Switzerland; they are less useful, apparently, in the eyes of the EU, but my hon. Friend’s point is that other devolved Governments and Administrations have taken these matters further. I sincerely wish that our own Government would do the same.

I am drifting a little from the central question, which is the matter of European citizenship, to which I will now return. Many people listening will be thinking, “Didn’t Wales vote to leave the EU—if by a narrow margin?” Like many hon. Members, I continue to receive angry messages from Brexit supporters. The only one repeatable here is: “We’re leaving—get on with it.” I have a vast collection of others that are slightly less polite. We are indeed leaving—unless, of course, there is a sudden outbreak of common sense on the Government Benches—but it is not as simple as that. We are learning—even the Secretary of State for International Trade, who famously said that negotiating new trade deals with the EU would be the simplest thing in the world, is learning—to our cost that it is not that simple, and today’s motion is just one part of our efforts to salvage something from the wreckage of this slow-motion disaster.

For the benefit of my Brexit-interlocutors, and as a Back-Bench MP responsible to my Arfon constituents, I want to note that all four Plaid Cymru constituencies voted to remain. This is in marked contrast to other Welsh constituencies that share our socioeconomic characteristics—marginalisation, poverty, powerlessness and low wages—but which are represented in this place by parties whose policies on the EU are, at best, a little less clear. Being broadly in favour of the EU, even in our present poor economic condition, is my Arfon constituents’ consistent view, as I will illustrate with a couple of points. First, in the 2015 general election, at the peak of UKIP support, 39 of Wales’ 40 constituencies swung to UKIP—the exception was Arfon, which swung to Plaid Cymru; and secondly, Arfon, I am proud to say, voted in the referendum to remain in the EU by a margin of 60:40.

We have valued our membership of the EU, including the economic support it has given us, and one aspect of this is valuing our European citizenship. The Welsh philosopher J. R. Jones, writing in the early 1960s and commenting on the then apparent terminal decline of the Welsh language, said something like this—I paraphrase in English for the benefit of the House:

“Leaving your country is a common and sometimes sad experience. But I know of something which is much more heart rending, for you could always return to your native land. And that is, not that you are leaving your country, but rather that your country is leaving you, being finally drawn away into the hands of another people, of another culture.”

J. R. Jones and many others inspired the next generation, including me, to campaign for the language, and as a result it is not threatened with extinction, for now at least. His insight is particularly telling today, in that for many, particularly of the younger generation, leaving the EU is just such a heart-rending experience.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I found that quote particularly moving, having found in my constituency and, indeed, my own family, young people who know nothing more than being part of the EU. We are taking their identity away from them and, indeed, from ourselves, because for 40 years we have known nothing else than being proud Europeans.

Hywel Williams: That is exactly the point I intend to make.

Many young people told me after the referendum that the result had been a profound emotional shock, an assault on the very foundations of their personal identities as Europeans, one telling me that she had been in floods of tears. They told me how they regretted losing key practical rights—this is not just an emotional identity matter—such as the right to travel without hindrance within the EU and the unqualified right to work and to study in other European countries. Today the UK Government have an opportunity to heal some of these divisions—intergenerational divisions and divisions between all peoples of these islands, particularly, as we have heard, in Ireland.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am sure that my hon. Friend shares my concern that many of these young people now coming of age, who will be most directly affected by our leaving the EU, had no say whatsoever. From year to year, this situation is worsening.

Hywel Williams: My hon. Friend makes a telling point to which I will return in a moment and which is covered by the two aspects of citizenship that we are proposing. The first concerns continuing citizenship for those of us who are citizens of the EU now by means of a bilateral treaty. The second concerns those who, being unborn, cannot access that citizenship—this is a matter for our children and our children’s children. Particularly acute, however, for me at least, is the position of those aged 14, 15 and 16 who understood the issues in the referendum but were unable to vote. I should say in passing that my party has always been in favour of the unqualified right to work and to study in other European countries. Today the UK Government have an opportunity to heal some of these divisions.

As I said, today the UK Government have an opportunity to heal some of these divisions. This is a positive point from the Plaid Cymru Benches, and I hope that the Government see it in that light. We are calling on them to secure and retain our right to European citizenship and not to take away what is already rightfully ours; so that we might leave the EU with just a little less self-inflicted injury.

We are European citizens, although I have to confess that I am biased: I am married to a European citizen—she is from Llanelli. She likewise is married to a European citizen—I am from Pwllderi. I do not want to labour the point, but we are both Welsh and European. I am therefore biased, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) said, so are our many friends and colleagues who have chosen to live and work in Wales and become Welsh, but not by rejecting their European citizenship or identity. To quote Gwynfor Evans again:

“Anyone can be Welsh, so long as you are prepared to take the consequences.”

That is our definition of citizenship. The citizens of Wales are those who are committed. I would commend that as a general definition of civic identity—I suppose I should say “civic nationalism”, but perhaps I should let that pass.
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and his Plaid Cymru colleagues on securing this debate and I am very much looking forward to giving the Scottish National party’s fraternal address to their conference in a couple of weeks. Does he agree that the Welsh nationalism that he and his colleagues espouse is very much like Scottish nationalism, in that it is outward looking and internationalist, and that all that our parties want is for our countries to be nation states with a seat at the top table in the EU, wielding the kind of power that the Republic of Ireland is currently wielding?

Hywel Williams: I agree entirely. As I said, my definition of identity, be it Welsh, English, Scottish, Northern Irish or whatever, is that it is self-ascribed—it is something that someone claims. That is why my party has such members as my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd, who comes from London—born in Eltham, I think—but is entirely Welsh and Welsh speaking. That is probably a consequence of marrying someone from Blaenau Ffestiniog, where no quarter is given or expected, but the point is that we have people in our party who come from all over the world, and long may that remain the case—we have no exclusive definition.

As I have said, Gwynfor said, a very long time ago:

“Anyone can be Welsh, so long as you are prepared to take the consequences.”

Those consequences, for us as European citizens, are that we have wide rights to travel, live work and study anywhere in the EU. European citizenship also gives us rights under EU law in respect of health, education, work, and social security, as well as the right to be free of discrimination based on nationality—which, I think, is relevant to what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd. The assumption so far on both sides, the EU and the Government, is that EU citizenship will lapse at the point of our exit from the European Union. However, EU citizenship did not replace UK citizenship when it came into force. It is additional: the two continue to co-exist, and leaving the EU does not entail the end of EU citizenship for UK citizens.

Unfortunately, the Government, by default, are intent on taking away something that is of significant value to the people of these islands. They should not do so. In fact, they should make the retention of EU citizenship an important central plank of future negotiations. It is something that we can ask—demand—of the European Union; it is something that it is in its power to give, and something that would be valued by our citizens. It would benefit us all, not least by establishing a common status for all EU citizens who live here, including those with Irish heritage and the 3 million or so people who have moved here from EU member states. It would establish a level playing field.

There was a glimmer of hope last year when, on 2 November, Bloomberg reported the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union as saying that the UK was—in the words of its headline—

“Open to Talking About Associate Citizenship After Brexit”

—which came as a surprise to some people—and that would allow “visa-free working rights” to UK nationals. The Secretary of State said:

“We’ll listen to anything of this nature. The aim of this exercise is to be good for Europe, good for Britain, and that means good for the citizens of Europe and Britain.”

I also note that the Prime Minister said in her statement on Monday that

“UK and EU citizens will still want to work and study in each other’s countries, and we are open to discussions about how to maintain the links between our people.”—[Official Report, 5 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 26.]

Perhaps I am over-interpreting, but that seems to me to be potentially code for associated citizenship. We shall see how things develop, but for me it had the flavour of a “get out of jail free” card.

Today I am arguing for maintaining the status quo. We are European citizens and will continue to be so, but obviously I urge the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister even now to pursue their less ambitious line further. For those who ask for a precedent for EU citizenship—and some have asked me for one—I point to the situation when Ireland became a free state. The UK allowed Irish citizens to retain their UK citizenship then, and indeed, as Brexit problems and contradictions have closed in, the Government—from the Prime Minister down—have been lavish in their praise for the arrangements between the Irish Republic and the UK. That is a model of which they approve.

Earlier, I mentioned people of Irish heritage. It is little remarked upon, but those with a qualifying link with any part of the entire island of Ireland through either family or residence—even a short residence in Northern Ireland—can apply for an Irish passport. That applies to millions of British people, including my neighbour Miss Norah Davies, whose passport application I was happy to sign some weeks ago. Her passport has now arrived, much to her satisfaction. I caution Ministers not to tangle with angry older citizens; they do so at their peril. Norah Davies’s link with Ireland through her mother reaches back to the first part of the last century. My link, alas, petered out two generations before hers, and I therefore do not qualify.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP):

There is a little-known anomaly which I and others have been trying to address, and to which the hon. Gentleman alluded inadvertently a moment ago. When the Irish Republic, or the Irish free state as it was then, left the Commonwealth in 1949, the British Government of the time allowed those who had been born in the Republic and had moved to Northern Ireland or elsewhere in the UK to retain their British citizenship. Nowadays, those who were born in the Republic and live in Northern Ireland cannot obtain British passports, although people who have never been to the Republic can obtain Irish passports. In terms of UK citizenship, those people are still somewhat disadvantaged. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is talking about EU citizenship, but given his allusion, does he agree that that needs to be addressed?

Hywel Williams: I must confess that I was entirely unaware of the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. If that is indeed the case, I think that it bears more examination, and I should be interested to discuss it with him further.

I was talking about Irish citizens and those of Irish extraction. There is a certain serendipity in the fact that UK-Irish citizens have those rights on the basis of one
grandparent while the rest of us do not. There will be people like me with British citizenship, people of Irish extraction with Irish citizenship, Irish people with Irish citizenship who live, work and vote here, and EU citizens with a certain status, whatever that may be. There is a certain randomness about the whole arrangement, which would in some respects be addressed by an overarching European citizenship. I fear that that serendipity will inevitably become more pressing when those with the favoured passports join the short queue at holiday airports while their less fortunate neighbours wait in the “others” line. It will have hit us a bit harder by then.

The Government say that they want a close relationship with our EU partners. That is their ambition, cited over and over again. They now have a practical opportunity to support that relationship through continuation citizenship for current British EU citizens, and, for all those who will not be EU citizens at the point of our leaving—that is, the unborn—a future status through associate EU citizenship.

So far the debate has been dominated by trade issues, the divorce bill and the Irish border—those are the issues with which we have been grappling for many months—but many Brexit promises before the referendum had an individualistic quality. People felt that they were being promised something individually. We would be richer and have better services, not least through having an extra £350 million every week to spend on the NHS. Promises such as that persuaded people, along with, of course, the immigration issue.

Liz Saville Roberts: We were also promised that we would be freer, with all the implications of independence. We are having to discuss this issue today because we must face the fact that we are unlikely to be so free.

Hywel Williams: The paradox has not escaped me.

Here is a chance for the Government to redeem themselves partially by securing for all UK individuals in the future that which they already have: UK and European citizenship. That would be popular. According to research findings published last year by the LSE and Opinium, six out of 10 people want to keep their EU citizenship. Support for retaining rights is particularly strong among 18 to 24-year-olds, 85% of whom want to retain their EU citizenship. They are the generation, more than any other, that will have to deal with the long-term fallout from Brexit over the coming decades, and to deal practically and emotionally with the loss of their firm expectation of continuing EU citizenship. Many members of that generation did not have a vote in the referendum, although they will be profoundly affected by its consequences—unless, of course, the Government take heed of our argument today. Thankfully, it is not my responsibility to drum up support for the Conservatives, but were the Government just to look to their own enlightened self-interest, they would see that at least one path is clear from the debate. If they will not do so, can we at least expect the Labour party to see where its interest lies, to support the motion, and to protect our people’s rights?

I am advised by wiser heads that there would be no new treaty requirements, so now is the time for the Government to give a clear and practical sign that they are taking UK citizens’ rights seriously—not by withdrawing our rights without our explicit consent, but by securing European Union citizenship for all, not just the random few. What is needed now, and what is currently lacking, is vision and clear political leadership to mend some of the divisions that Brexit has opened up. In the Prime Minister’s own words last Monday.

“let us get on with it.”—[Official Report, 5 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 28.]
worried about certainty. I have the military base of Leuchars in my constituency and those who have German wives, for instance, still do not have certainty. I know the Minister might not be able to answer this today, but please will she look into that, particularly for military families?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, particularly for military families, who move around a great deal and for whom it might be harder to demonstrate living in one particular place. We are determined to make sure this scheme has a default position of accepting that people are EU citizens living here, and we want there to be a default “Yes” for settled status, and certainly not a default “No.”

We have been clear that we will seek to agree an implementation period beyond March 2019 of around two years. The purpose of such a period is to give people, business and indeed our own public services in the UK and across the EU the time they need to put in place the new arrangements that will be required to adjust to our future partnership. It will take time to implement a new immigration framework.

Jonathan Edwards: I fear the Minister might have misunderstood the topic for debate. We are aiming to discuss the issue of the European citizenship of UK subjects, as opposed to the rights of EU citizens.

Caroline Nokes: I am going to move on to the points the hon. Member for Arfon made, and perhaps the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) will indulge me by allowing me to get there.

As I was about to say, during the implementation period, which will be time-limited, people will be able to come to the UK to live and work as they do now, and this will be reciprocal, meaning UK nationals will also be able to travel to live and work in the EU.

Last week, the Home Secretary published a position paper setting out that EU citizens arriving during the implementation period should be able to work towards settlement in the UK. People arriving during this period should not have the same expectations as those who arrived during our membership of the EU, but it is right that we set out the rules that will apply to these individuals when this period ends, to provide them with the certainty they need. These rights will be enforceable in UK law, and we will not seek to include them in the withdrawal agreement; however, we will discuss this with the Commission in the coming weeks.

Turning more broadly to the question of EU citizenship, the Government have been clear that our membership of the EU will end on 29 March 2019. We are content to listen to proposals from the EU on associate citizenship for UK nationals. However, to date this has not been formally proposed to the UK in the negotiations. EU treaty provisions state that only citizens of EU member states are able to hold EU citizenship. Therefore, when the UK ceases to be a member of the European Union, UK nationals will no longer hold EU citizenship unless they hold dual nationality with another member state.

Liz Saville Roberts: Does the right hon. Lady not agree that we are talking about an interpretation of the law as it stands and a matter of political will? We would be begging the Government to bring this matter, as the right of individual citizens of the United Kingdom, into negotiations as we move forward with Brexit?

Caroline Nokes: As I said just a moment ago, the Government position is that we are very happy to discuss this specific issue, but we must do so reflecting on the law as it currently stands, and the position in law is very clear: once we have left the EU, citizens living here will no longer be resident in an EU member state.

The Prime Minister has been clear, and she reinforced this message in her speech on Friday, that we are seeking the broadest and deepest possible future partnership with the EU, and that a key part of that is maintaining the links between our people. We are clear that, as we leave the EU, free movement of people will come to an end and we will control the number of people who come to live in our country, but UK citizens will still want to work and study in EU countries, just as EU citizens will want to do the same here, which is why the Prime Minister is putting the interests of EU and UK citizens at the heart of her approach, and we are open to discussing how to facilitate these valuable links.

2.57 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): First, may I put on record my thanks to the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) for the considered way in which he opened the debate? I also wish him a speedy recovery from the heavy cold he has been suffering from, and congratulate him on getting to the end of his speech.

I listened carefully to what the Minister said, but I am afraid that the weakness at the heart of the Government’s position—whether on EU citizenship in the future, the rights of EU citizens in this country, or indeed immigration more generally—is the failure of the Government to bring proposed legislation before this House. I start with the immigration Bill which was originally scheduled to be published last summer. The Home Secretary said last October to the House and the Home Affairs Committee that there would be an immigration White Paper by the end of last year and a Bill early this year. The then immigration Minister—not the right hon. Lady, but her predecessor the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis)—told the Committee in November that a White Paper would be produced soon. The right hon. Lady told this House on 5 February that there would be a White Paper “when the time is right”—[Official Report, 5 February 2018; Vol. 635, c. 1211.]

She then said on 26 February that there would be a White Paper in due course. That is simply not good enough to deal with an issue of this seriousness.

Words are very important, not just the various contorted phrases the Government have used to justify their inaction, but also remarks made about the status of our existing EU citizens, and the reported comments of the International Trade Secretary that the “uncertain status of EU nationals living in the UK is ‘one of our main cards’ in the Brexit negotiations.”

That is a matter of great regret.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that many companies rely on their employees travelling, often at very short notice? I am thinking of Airbus—a certain number of people from this country
will just hop on a plane to Toulouse or Bremen to finish the work if a wing is not finished. Things like that need to be considered owing to the potential effect on future investment choices that such companies will make.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It comes as no surprise that the deputy director general of the CBI, no less, has said of this Tory Government that he is “hugely frustrated” by their lack of progress on an immigration Bill.

EU citizens are our friends, our colleagues and our neighbours. They are people on whose doors we knocked in the general election last year. When people are making a positive contribution to our economy, our national health service, which already has issues with recruitment, social care, our universities and other sectors, the Government’s continuing failure to legislate only highlights the fact that they could have done so much unilaterally a long time ago. The Minister referred to the phase I agreement, which I have in front of me, and the continuing uncertainty mentioned by the hon. Member for Arfon remains an issue. Paragraph 34 of the agreement is clear:

“Both Parties agree that the Withdrawal Agreement should provide for the legal effects of the citizens’ rights Part both in the UK and in the Union. UK domestic legislation should also be enacted to this effect.”

Where is the legislation? It should be brought forward as soon as possible.

We now know that nothing will be agreed in the negotiations until everything is agreed. We also know, because the Immigration Minister told the House a few weeks ago, that the Migration Advisory Committee has been asked “to advise on the economic aspects of the UK’s exit” by September, and I see that the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), is nodding. The Immigration Minister then said that there was “plenty of time to take account of the MAC’s recommendations in designing the longer-term immigration system for the UK.”—[Official Report, 5 February 2018; Vol. 635, c. 1212.]

She says “plenty of time” but this is a two-year Parliament, and she has until March 2019 to get legislation on the statute book. Time is of the essence. If I take the Minister at her word that we will have the legislation when the time is right, may I gently suggest that that time might be now? She attends the Cabinet in her role as Immigration Minister, and she needs to persuade the Cabinet to give her the time to bring the legislation before this House. While it is my view and that of the Opposition that the status of EU nationals in this country should have been dealt with unilaterally a long time ago, not left subject to negotiation in this way—nor should there ever have been the reported comments of the International Trade Secretary that people be used as bargaining chips—the Minister could act now, and act she should.

I welcome the contribution from the hon. Member for Arfon, and the Minister said that it would be considered, and we must be careful about not excluding options from the table as we go forward. None the less, I suggest to the Minister, as she tries to put together the whole gamut of immigration policy for this country post-Brexit, that in order to achieve a fair, managed and efficient policy she must look at this country’s economic needs and work with business and the trade unions.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I congratulate him on his speech. However, would it be Labour party policy to support our proposal for associate citizenship?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I have just said that we should not take any options off the table. I always welcome contributions from the hon. Gentleman, and I look forward to the Government’s response—[Interruption.] I will certainly give the hon. Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) my position on a number of matters in a moment, but let me make another point first.

Perhaps the Tory party could repair its relationship with the CBI if it properly consulted business and the unions about our future immigration system. It could end the years of exploitation of migrant workers, which it has done so little about, increase the number of prosecutions for breaches of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998, which have been going on for far too long, reinstate the migrant impact fund, remove international students from the statistics and, perhaps above all, move away from this obsession with bogus immigration targets. The Tories have never achieved their numerical target, despite having promised it over three general elections.

Liz Saville Roberts: I have much sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman has to say, but it does not relate to the motion, which is about the future rights of UK citizens. There is an interesting discussion to be had about the rights of EU citizens coming into the UK, but that is for another debate.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I have responded to the point made from the hon. Member for Arfon about that. I appreciate the narrow point about UK citizens going forward, but this is a broad debate and I am sure that the hon. Lady would not want to lose the opportunity to put such matters to the Minister, as I am seeking to do.

I conclude by saying that an unconditional commitment on the rights of EU citizens in this country could have been made already. It can still be offered, and the Government should move away from their obsession with numbers and restore confidence in our immigration system.

3.6 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called so early in this debate and to be given a window into the world of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). It is a privilege, and I am enjoying it very much. The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) opened this debate by saying that his party has been shaped by the issue of Europe, and I say to him that it takes one to know one. The Conservative party has also been shaped by Europe, and my constituency has perhaps been shaped to a greater extent by Europe than almost any other.

I was pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman focus not on EU citizens’ rights in this country, but on the reciprocal rights for UK citizens. However, I am afraid that I will
disappoint him to some extent, as others have, by focusing on the rights of EU citizens, although not entirely, because it is only fair to rebuff some of what has been said recently. The Government brought in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to combat some of the issues that have just been talked about, and we brought in the controlling migration fund at triple the level of the migration impact fund that was praised by the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds). We should therefore not be ashamed of what we have achieved for the rights of migrant workers.

I should acknowledge the thoughtful issues of identity that the hon. Member for Arfon opened the debate with, because although my constituency may indeed have voted to leave the European Union more resoundingly than any other, it has to some extent been shaped by citizens of the European Union perhaps more than anywhere else. We have streets in Boston that are populated with shops that would otherwise be empty and are entirely focused on our new eastern European communities. That means that we are uniquely attuned to the issues of identity that the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

Let us think about why a constituency like mine voted so strongly. It was not a rejection of those EU rights nor of EU citizens as individuals. I do not wish to re-run the referendum again—not least because I was on a different side from my constituents—but it was not a rejection of those individuals. It was a rejection of a migration policy that had not worked for a constituency such as mine and of an approach that had been taken in the minds of many of my constituents, by Brussels over many years that did not reflect the best interests of the United Kingdom as a whole.

When the hon. Gentleman talks about identity, I hope he bears it in mind that far more of my constituents have married into the communities that have arrived than is the case elsewhere. They have often formed relationships and have children in school—schools where pupils have one parent from England and one from a European Union country. That sense of identity is uniquely altered by the migration policy he talks about, and it means that my constituents have, if not a unique, perhaps a greater desire than others to be able to visit Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and all those countries with which we benefit from reciprocal rights.

None of my voters voted for British driving licences to no longer be valid on the continent or for us no longer to have the reciprocal rights we have enjoyed for so long. We, as a country, have had a full and blossoming relationship with Europe, and we would all acknowledge it is in the interests of both Europe and the UK to secure many of those things for the future. We should pay tribute to the negotiating position the Prime Minister set out last week in a pragmatic, sensible bid to try to secure some of the rights that the hon. Gentleman talked about.

We should also acknowledge that people voted in the referendum for a different set of circumstances after we leave, which inevitably means that we have to consider what those differences might look like. The Minister is right to say that the starting point has to be that we will no longer have precisely those rights in law when we leave. It is in tune with the Prime Minister’s pragmatic approach to say that we have to acknowledge that that is the case, and we have to ensure that we get the best possible outcome at the end of these negotiations.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The hon. Gentleman talks about people’s view that there would be changed circumstances. Given the votes in a plethora of nation states within the EU, not least in Italy at the weekend, who knows what changes will come in the very institution we are talking about? Does he agree that in future the EU might not be as people envisage it at the moment?

Matt Warman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that this is a moveable feast on the other side of the channel, and we should bear that in mind.

Jonathan Edwards: The hon. Gentleman raises a point made by the Minister, on whom I wished to intervene. He will be aware of the Vienna convention on the law of treaties and that, under that legal ruling, citizens’ rights may not be lost. Surely that is the legal precedent we should be following.

Matt Warman: The hon. Gentleman uses the word “may,” and we should be looking at what the options are and at what the precedents may be. The Minister is right to say that we will no longer be members when we leave, and therefore we will no longer have the rights we currently have. The hon. Gentleman may pray in aid precedents that suggest something else, and we may be able to rely on some of those precedents in due course. We should not prejudge any of that, and we have to be pragmatic in where we start.

It is also worth bearing it in mind that people across my constituency and across the country voted for precisely those kinds of differences. They voted for the Government to negotiate a new relationship with Europe, which is precisely what we are doing.

One aspect of the motion on which the hon. Member for Arfon did not particularly dwell is single market access, which defines a huge part of our relationship with the EU. This is not a fault that he committed, but it is a frustrating and patronising element of some aspects of this debate to say that people did not know what they were voting for when they voted in the referendum. My constituents were very clear that they were voting to leave the single market because they were voting to strike our own trade deals with other countries across the world and to open up new opportunities. We should not allow ourselves to pretend there was not a full and frank debate about what leaving the European Union might mean before people went into the polling booths. A crucial part of the motion implies there are not the opportunities outside the EU that people voted for. The hon. Gentleman frames it as though all we will be doing is losing rights when we leave the European Union. We should, of course, bear it in mind that there will be a different relationship, but there are opportunities out there, too. Part of the Prime Minister’s positive approach is to say that there are opportunities that we must seize and that there is another side to the coin—that not everyone can have every single thing they might wish for.

The hon. Gentleman proposed that we could stay in the single market and retain all our rights as they are today. My response to him is that he should not be wilfully blind to the opportunities. I think we will get a good deal with the European Union that allows us to retain many of the benefits we see today, but we will also have access to a wider world out there in a very different way. That is not to say that it will all be a bed
of roses and that it will be the easiest thing we could ever do, but he should acknowledge the other side of the coin.

**Hywel Williams**: I am an optimist by nature, but how does the hon. Gentleman respond to the observation last week that we are exchanging a three-course meal for the promise of a bag of crisps?

**Matt Warman**: I do not want to say that we can have our cake and eat it, but we can have a three-course meal and a bag of crisps. It is always tempting for one side of the argument to say it will all be brilliant and for the other side of the argument to say it will all be terrible. The reality is that, neither at this time of day nor at any other, I do not much fancy a three-course meal and a bag of crisps at the same moment, but there is a compromise somewhere in the middle, which is what we will be seeking.

Whether we represent constituencies such as mine or constituencies with far lower levels of migration, we have all heard the huge concern among EU citizens living in this country about what their status might be. We should accept it is the genuine and proven intention of the Prime Minister to seek to provide reassurance as soon as possible in the debate, but we should also bear it in mind—I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for not doing this at he opened the debate—that the more we talk about those concerns, the more we fall into the trap of whipping up those concerns and the more we worry people who should not be worried. It is not only unfair on them, but it is irresponsible of us if we do that.

A number of constituents have come to tell me they are concerned both that they might not be able to travel as easily to the home country of their boyfriend or girlfriend, or that they may not be able to stay in this country. I have been pleased to be able to provide them with some reassurance, but I have not had tens of thousands of people coming to me to make that point because I have not stirred up such feelings. I am pleased the hon. Gentleman did not do so in his speech, although not so pleased that I will be supporting the motion today.

This has been a uniquely thoughtful debate, notwithstanding my own contribution, and it is a pleasure to be part of a debate on Brexit that is not as high octane and unhelpful as some we have seen, and that has not produced more heat than light. Perhaps this sets a precedent for how we might continue the negotiations.

3.18 pm

**Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) for opening the debate. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) and I may not agree on everything, but he makes a good point about trying to have a thoughtful debate, which is what we are having today. I thank him for his contribution, and I particularly thank Plaid Cymru for giving us the opportunity to discuss this subject.

As a number of Members have argued, the importance of EU nationals to the UK should not and cannot be overestimated in terms of their financial contribution and, more important, how they enrich our society by being here. I want to live in a society that is made more diverse and enriched by their presence, as is the case in my constituency and others.

Today’s debate is particularly helpful because it gives us the opportunity to discuss our own EU citizenship, which we continue to enjoy for the time being. I hope that the Government will give consideration to the idea of associate citizenship suggested by the hon. Member for Arfon, because the benefits of EU membership work both ways—a point that was often lost during the referendum campaign. We look set to lose the huge range of benefits we receive as EU citizens, and nothing the UK Government have said in this debate or others reassures me that they are on top of plugging the gap that will necessarily appear if we are taken out of the European Union.

I have benefited personally from freedom of movement. I was able to work elsewhere in the European Union and receive the benefits of healthcare. I studied there and took part in the Erasmus scheme because of my European citizenship. If I felt ill when I was living in Belgium, I could use the hospitals—there was absolutely no question about or problem with that—and anybody who visited me had exactly the same rights. I feel every inch a European in my identity. I know that identity is not the main driver of this debate, but we should think about it. Even more than that, however, I value my European citizenship.

As I reflect on my own personal experience, one thing that depresses me about where we are going is that by the end of this Parliament, perhaps uniquely, young people will have fewer opportunities and fewer rights than those of us who sit in this Parliament have enjoyed. We should all reflect on that. Regardless of who is in government and which parties make up this place, it should be—and I think it is—the aspiration of all of us that at the end of any Parliament, young people should have more and better opportunities than those who went before them. That should always be our goal, but through the removal of EU citizenship, we will be taking a backward step. Young people will have fewer opportunities. Retaining citizenship would help. I do not think it would plug the gap entirely, but it would help.

The Minister said that she was waiting for the European Union to come up with some ideas about associate EU citizenship, but the European Union did not get us into this mess in the first place; the UK Government did. The fact that, almost two years on, they are still waiting for the EU to come up with solutions tells us a great deal about the state of affairs in the UK Government. It is incumbent on them to look at our problems and meet the challenges. Members are suggesting plenty of ideas—I do not agree with all of them, and neither will everyone else—and the Government should do more than adopt a wait-and-see policy almost two years on from the referendum.

Gently and in a comradely spirit, I urge the Labour party to do the same, especially on issues such as associate membership. I agreed with much of what the shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), said, but I encourage him to look a little more deeply into that issue, because we should be addressing it in this Parliament.

There are a lot of gaps to be filled. It strikes me—I have made this point before—that it is not entirely the Government’s fault. Vote Leave campaigned on a blank
piece of paper, as has been said a number of times in this Chamber. That is why we still have so many gaps. It is the responsibility of this place to fill some of those gaps, working with our colleagues in the devolved Administrations and local authorities and with other stakeholders. It was an act of gross irresponsibility by Vote Leave not even to bother having a manifesto or a White Paper, which means that we have to fill in the gaps.

In his thoughtful speech, the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness referenced the single market. Vote Leave and the leavers should have been very clear that we would be leaving the single market. They were not. It is possible—I direct this as much to those on the Labour Front Bench as to those on the Government Front Bench—to leave the European Union and remain in the single market. That is a fact—end of story. That is something that we can do. It is quite depressing that many of us have to keep on saying that. I cannot believe that we have to use up time in the House of Commons to reiterate that fact.

Matt Warman: The hon. Gentleman is factually correct, but the tenor of the campaign that was fought—and I was on the other side of it—was that there would be a clean break with the European Union. In that spirit, does he not think that that means being able to do our own trade deals and leaving the single market?

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to learn that I disagree with him. No, that is not what it means. He mentions the Government implementing policy in the spirit of how the campaign was conducted, but we have a very different Government implementing policy in the spirit of how the campaign was conducted. Does he not think that that means being able to do our own trade deals and leaving the single market?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and it is why today’s debate on associate citizenship is so important and why I am so glad it has been brought forward.

I will talk a little about Scotland’s own experiences—you will be well aware of this, Madam Deputy Speaker. This idea of European citizenship is not a new concept that arose in the 1970s; it is a historical one. It is said that in 1295 Scots looked at the idea of dual citizenship with the French as part of the auld alliance. If we go down the Corridors through to the House of Lords, we see the English Tudor monarchs on the wall, along with the Scots Tudor monarchs, some of whom were French—the Dauphin of France at that time is up on the wall there. If we look at the rights of Scots traders as citizens in places such as Veere in the Netherlands, we see that a former Member of this House, Winnie Ewing, was the honorary conservator of the privileges of the Scottish staple of Veere back in the day. Going back even further, to the letter of Lubeck, we see that the first thing that William Wallace did after the battle of Stirling bridge and Scottish independence was to get back in touch with our European partners, because this idea of citizenship—this idea of working together and that Scotland is a European nation—does not go back just to the 1970s; it goes back many hundreds of years. I will move on from that point, but I encourage Members to read and listen to the works of my constituent Billy Kay, who has been excellent on the impact of the Scottish diaspora elsewhere in Europe.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): The hon. Gentleman is making a fascinating speech, but he is illustrating the point beautifully that our European identities, whether we are English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish, relate to our relations in Europe, not with the European Union.

Stephen Gethins: As usual, the Minister leads me nicely on to my next point: this is about more than history and identity. I hope that at some point he will be able to tell us how we will replicate these ideas of
citizenship and the benefits we have as citizens—our right to study, to work and to travel, our right to healthcare and our human rights that derive from our European citizenship. One Member made the good point about people who work here being able to work elsewhere at short notice. That goes to the heart of European citizenship, and it is why I am so grateful to the Minister, as usual, for intervening on that point.

The value to our economy of European citizenship is crucial. I think of the academics at the University of St Andrews, who can go to work and collaborate with their partners elsewhere in Europe, but it works in both directions: I think of farmers such as the one next door to me, James Orr, who relies on seasonal workers to pick his broccoli, which must still be picked by hand. The Minister for Immigration talked about certainty. I have heard other Ministers say that EU nationals should now feel a sense of certainty in their citizenship, but my postbags tell a different story, as, I suspect, do the postbags of other Members. That is why I raised the point about military families, but we must also keep in mind other EU nationals, who contribute so much, just as UK citizens in other EU countries do.

**Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP):** My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. I visited one of the largest private sector employers in my constituency on Monday, when I heard about its troubles in accessing private sector employers in my constituency on Monday, when I heard about its troubles in accessing
to UK citizenship. Never have they been mutually exclusive. EU citizenship are held to be so important. It is entirely possible to pursue associate EU citizenship for UK citizens, and there are ample precedents from which such a scheme could draw. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) has just mentioned Greenland, and my hon. Friend the Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) mentioned the experience in Ireland. Perhaps Members would like to look into the interesting situation of the citizens of some of the Crown dependencies in the Channel Islands, where there is a bespoke and unique relationship. I suppose the point I am making is that it is a matter of political will. When it comes to negotiations, there is a way to ensure that benefits are afforded to everybody equally.

**Stephen Gethins:** My hon. Friend makes a good point about his constituency experiences, and it has been interesting to hear those from a number of Members. I noted that Plaid Cymru Members talked about the decline of UKIP. Scotland was always ahead of the game on UKIP, because it never had any success there—I do not believe it ever saved a deposit in a parliamentary election in Scotland. That is why Scotland voted so overwhelmingly to remain part of the EU; it is about our EU citizenship, but it is about so much more than that. I urge the Government to look at these proposals. Interestingly, Greenland, as a part of a European Union member state, left the EU and the other part of the member state remains. I note that when Greenland left, the withdrawal agreement ensured the rights of EU citizens. EU citizenship is built on these links, and it is crucial not only to our economy but to the future of young people. I urge the Government to reconsider, and I thank Plaid Cymru again for bringing this debate to the House.

3.33 pm

**Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC):** Being a citizen of the EU brings tangible benefits, and I want to return the debate to focusing a little on the impact of European citizenship on UK citizens. It allows people from the UK to move easily to mainland Europe and between European countries, be it for work, study or pleasure. Furthermore, when we are in Europe it enables us to enjoy a range of rights on healthcare, education, work and social security. Young people I meet feel particularly strongly about this issue. Given the insecurity clouding the horizons of so many across the UK, it is not surprising that the material freedoms afforded by EU citizenship are held to be so important.

I should mention in passing that it is important to remember that EU citizenship has always been additional to UK citizenship. Never have they been mutually exclusive. For many, EU citizenship and the rights that it entails have become synonymous with opportunity, offering them a chance to broaden their horizons. As has been mentioned, there is no legal reason why a limit must be placed on such opportunity—no reason why UK citizens must be stripped of their rights and freedoms.

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con):** On the topic of reasons, does the hon. Gentleman not agree that the free movement of labour was a key concern of not only those who voted leave but those who voted remain, like me? Does he not believe that, as elected representatives, it is important for us to represent their views?

**Ben Lake:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, although I fear that perhaps she mistakes the point I was making. Perhaps I was not clear enough: I am discussing the rights of UK citizens and their ability to travel to Europe to work and to live. The issue is not freedom of movement; I am talking about a system that people would be able to opt into, but that they could also opt out of.

It is entirely possible to pursue associate EU citizenship for UK citizens, and there are ample precedents from which such a scheme could draw. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) has just mentioned Greenland, and my hon. Friend the Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) mentioned the experience in Ireland. Perhaps Members would like to look into the interesting situation of the citizens of some of the Crown dependencies in the Channel Islands, where there is a bespoke and unique relationship. I suppose the point I am making is that it is a matter of political will. When it comes to negotiations, there is a way to ensure that benefits are afforded to everybody equally.

**Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con):** The hon. Gentleman is making a strong case. Currently, young people—in the UK can go without a permit to work in 30 other countries: the 27 other EU countries and three of the European economic area countries. After we come out the EU, the number will be zero. A French person of the same age will still be able to go to 29 different countries. What a difference in rights and opportunities that is.

**Ben Lake:** I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He makes an important point about unnecessarily limiting the horizons of UK citizens. That is the point I am trying to make, and I wholeheartedly agree with him.

As I mentioned, this is perhaps not a legal issue but more a question of political will. The will of the public—in particular, their support for such a measure—is quite clear. As my hon. Friend the Member for Arfon mentioned in his opening remarks, according to research led by the London School of Economics and Opinium in July 2017, of those Britons asked, six out of 10 wanted to keep their EU citizenship after Brexit, and they particularly wanted to keep the rights to live, work, study and travel within the EU. Support for the retention of those rights
is particularly strong among 18 to 24-year-olds, of whom 85% want to retain their EU citizenship in addition to their British citizenship.

In October 2017, a further report was published by the LSE on youth perspectives and priorities for the Brexit negotiations. Focus groups revealed widespread fear and frustration. Prime among young people’s concerns were questions regarding the loss of their EU benefits, including their ability to gain access to educational programmes, opportunities to work and travel in Europe, and rights that they have once they are there.

Ceredigion, the constituency that I have the honour of serving, was one of the handful of Welsh areas that voted to remain. Indeed, prior to the referendum, Ceredigion was widely reported to be one of the most Europhile counties in the whole United Kingdom. To put it bluntly, my constituency did not support leaving the EU and most certainly did not give any Government a mandate to deny its citizens the rights and freedoms that membership of the EU ensures, or, as the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) said, a mandate to limit their horizons and opportunities in comparison with citizens of other European states.

As has been mentioned, the question of the future status of the rights bestowed on UK citizens by EU membership will not disappear; rather, it will grow in both prominence and importance as negotiations progress. A lot has been made of the clarity, or lack thereof, of EU law on the status of the rights of UK citizens after we have left, but I wish to draw attention to international law. European law and its founding treaties may offer a clear interpretation one way, but the reverse is equally clear in international law. If anything, the 1969 Vienna convention on the law of treaties means that it is incumbent on both the UK and the EU to address this matter of future status urgently, for even if article 70(1)(b) of the convention is interpreted in such a way that the withdrawal of a member state from the EU extinguishes the rights of individuals created by the founding treaties, international law would still require that a treaty is agreed on the future status of such rights.

Associate European citizenship is a model that the UK Government could adopt and pursue. As well as affording UK citizens the ability to continue to enjoy the rights and freedoms they currently do, it would safeguard the dormant rights of younger generations, and, perhaps most importantly of all, grant generations yet to be born the same opportunities from which those of us present here today have been able to benefit.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I suggest that what the EU may or may not do is not a matter for this House. I do not think that I have cast any aspersions on what the EU might want to do. What I am saying is that it is in the gift of the Government, and this place, to pursue associate European citizenship to ensure that our young people—in fact not just young people but citizens of the UK old and young—can still enjoy the rights that we currently have.

David T. C. Davies: Is he seriously suggesting that the European Union is likely to ban young people from Britain from travelling in other EU countries? If it was trying to do that, would we not be quite right to walk away from an organisation that was willing to contemplate such an outrageous thing?

Ben Lake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Does he share the real horror of young people’s concerns regarding the loss of their EU benefits, including their ability to gain access to educational programmes, opportunities to work and travel in Europe, and rights that they have once they are there.

David T. C. Davies: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Is he seriously suggesting that the European Union is likely to ban young people from Britain from travelling in other EU countries? If it was trying to do that, we would not be quite right to walk away from an organisation that was willing to contemplate such an outrageous thing?

Ben Lake: I respectfully thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I suggest that what the EU may or may not do is not a matter for this House. I do not think that I have cast any aspersions on what the EU might want to do. What I am saying is that it is in the gift of the Government, and this place, to pursue associate European citizenship to ensure that our young people—in fact not just young people but citizens of the UK old and young—can still enjoy the rights that we currently have.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. Does he share my concern that a fourth-year student at Lochend High School in Easterhouse should be able to go on to the Erasmus programme in the next year or two, but because of the vague promises that the Prime Minister has made, that opportunity will not be there? It is therefore up to the UK Government who are taking such opportunities away from the young people in the east of Glasgow.

Ben Lake: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I agree that the uncertainty is certainly not helpful to anybody. When I speak to a lot of young people, those are precisely the concerns that they raise with me. They do not know what the future holds. At one time, they did know—they were able to plan ahead to do the things that their elder siblings or family members had been able to enjoy. Now they find themselves in the daunting situation of not being able to do so.

My point is that Brexit need not rid UK nationals—young or old—of those rights, and international law is quite clear on that. How UK nationals retain their European citizenship after Brexit is therefore a matter of political will. It is for the Government to propose a model to achieve that, and to negotiate so that it is included in the withdrawal agreement.

Associate citizenship not only presents a possible solution but offers much-needed compromise for an embattled Government and a way to heal the deep divisions that have emerged across the UK. Let me reiterate a point that I made earlier to the hon. Member for Chippingham (Michelle Donelan): this will be a model in which someone could opt in or refuse to opt in—the choice will be theirs. It will be a way to heal divisions. The former Education Secretary, the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), said that “if Brexit does not work for young people in our country, in the end it will not be sustainable”.—[Official Report, 17 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 918.]
3.44 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Dirprwy Lefarydd. It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) for his introduction to the debate.

I start by stating the obvious. We are not subjects; we are citizens, and as such we are individuals who consent to the rule of Government. The Government rule in accordance with the will of the citizens. We are citizens and we are individuals, and Brexit has consequences for our lives as individuals whether we voted to leave or to remain. I echo exactly what my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion said: surely this debate offers an opportunity to heal divisions within our society and to respect both sides of the referendum vote divide, by respecting individuals and permitting them to choose.

As individuals, we stand to lose our heritage as European citizens—a heritage we might not even have been aware was in our possession, a family treasure forgotten at the back of the display cabinet and about to be discarded in the bitter acrimony of divorce. It is to my surprise that it has taken an Opposition day debate initiated by Plaid Cymru to focus in depth on the wide-reaching implication of the loss we face, and I would like to take the opportunity to thank Professor Volker Roeben and my colleague Jill Evans MEP, who have highlighted both the desirability and the legality of our rights as European citizens, and to thank the thousands who have signed Plaid Cymru’s petition in the past two days.

However—this needs to be emphasised, and we need to use the language of Brexit—Brexit must not mean treating individual citizens as vassals, under obligation to our political masters, who might strip us of our citizenship at their whim. It is worth all of us who are speaking in favour of this proposal emphasising that it is clearly permissible in international law. Citizens’ rights are not the Government’s gift to trade, according to the 1969 Vienna convention on treaties. While an EU member state is democratically free to terminate its EU membership, it cannot extinguish the individual status of citizenship, nor its associated rights, without the consent of the individual.

Is there a precedent for this? We have heard a number of precedents already, and I should like to focus on one. We have lived with it for so long that we possibly do not really appreciate or see its value. Following the creation of Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State—now, of course, the Republic of Ireland-politicians debated the implications of how where people lived affected their rights as citizens. Irish citizens who reside in the UK while still remaining Irish citizens enjoy all the benefits of UK citizenship, including the freedom to take up residence and employment in the UK. Irish citizens can play a full part in UK political life, including voting in parliamentary elections and seeking membership of this House. The Republic of Ireland also offers citizenship to all residents of the island of Ireland, and people who are citizens of the UK are entitled to residency in Ireland without any conditions or restrictions. Unlike citizens of other countries, UK citizens are not subject to Ireland’s Aliens Act 1935. That means that a UK citizen does not need a visa or any form of residence permit or employment permit in Ireland. We are entitled to move to Ireland from any country, and we may move to Ireland to work or to retire.

Joanna Cherry: Is the hon. Lady, like me, visited in her regular constituency surgeries by many people who are currently British citizens who are lucky enough to have an Irish parent and are looking for an MP’s signature on their Irish passport application?

Liz Saville Roberts: I am grateful for that intervention, and I wonder whether the way this operates in Ireland might be a model for an opt-in pattern for us to think about if we take this issue through to the next stage of making practical considerations.

Unlike other EU citizens, UK citizens may retire to Ireland without having to establish whether we have sufficient resources or are in possession of health insurance. In fact, if we are visiting Ireland we do not even need a European health insurance card to get healthcare services—only a passport or some form of identification to prove UK citizenship.

Interestingly, that did not happen without parliamentary debate and intervention 96 years ago, much of it initiated, interestingly, by the Conservatives and Unionists of that time. I quote from Hansard of 26 June 1922, when Colonel John Gretton—Conservative, Burton—asked the Secretary of State for the Colonies “whether acceptance of the status of a citizen of the Irish Free State, under Clause 3 of the suggested Constitution for Southern Ireland, would deprive “the person so accepting of his rights as a British subject in Ireland”.

To which Mr Winston Churchill—for it was he—replied: “The answer is in the negative.”

Mr Gideon Oliphant-Murray, a Unionist MP from Glasgow, pressed the question: “Is it not a fact that a citizen of a British Dominion is, ipso facto, a British subject?”

To which Mr Churchill replied: “So will he be in the Irish Free State.”

Mr Oliphant-Murray: “That is not the case.”

But Mr Churchill was having nothing of it: “It is the case.”—[Official Report, 26 June 1922; Vol. 155, c. 1663.]

If Winston Churchill felt the need to ensure that individuals should not be stripped of their wished-for citizenship in 1922, surely Conservative Members are honour-bound and loyalty-bound to respect the citizens of 2018 in a similar fashion. All it took was an expression of will on the part of the Conservatives and Unionists of the time and the rights to vote for the Westminster Parliament, as well as the rights of abode and work, were safeguarded. Political will was also brought to bear in relation to Hong Kong, with the British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act 1990 and the subsequent 1997 Act, which allowed non-Chinese ethnic minorities to acquire full British citizenship.

I raise these as examples of political need but also flexibility, initiative and a respect for the individual caught up in the crossfire of state game-playing. This is a matter of political will, indicative of what the Government respect—the simplistic legal interpretation of Brexit...
zealots, which just so happens to bolster an ideological adherence, or the quiet right of citizens to express their will in accordance with international law. I wonder whether the Government took the opportunity to raise this matter with Guy Verhofstadt when he visited yesterday, and who I note also supports our proposal.

This is not an abstract concept or a nicety of legalese. My daughter Lowri has been able to action her right to live and work in France and Spain without constraint, just as I, somewhat longer ago, was able to action my right to study alongside Irish students in Ireland. I speak for many, many of my constituents when I say that we are proud to exercise our rights as citizens of Wales and citizens of Europe. The state may present its adherence, or the quiet right of citizens to express their zealots, which just so happens to bolster an ideological adherence, or the quiet right of citizens to express their will in accordance with international law. I wonder whether the Government took the opportunity to raise this matter with Guy Verhofstadt when he visited yesterday, and who I note also supports our proposal.

3.53 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): It is a huge pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) on his speech, which opened the debate. He set out the case with his usual forensic style, providing great clarity and detail about what is being proposed. I also thoroughly enjoyed the speeches from the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), who once again proved why he is one of the superstar performers of this Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), who again showed why he is one of the rising stars of Welsh politics, and my parliamentary leader, my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), who spoke with her usual great authority, concentrating on the example following the independence of Ireland at the beginning of the last century. She gave us a fantastic history lesson in her contribution.

On the morning after the referendum, on 24 June 2016, I had been given the honour of being the guest speaker at the graduation ceremony of the local further education college in my county, Coleg Sir Gâr. The ceremony was held at the fabulous Flos Las racecourse in Carwe, in my constituency. Somewhat bleary-eyed and shellshocked after watching the referendum results in the early hours of the morning, I vividly remember standing up on the podium and looking out at the hundreds of young graduates and their families before me. I dropped my speaking notes and went completely off script. Instead of diving into my speech, to talk about how proud they should be of their achievements and how they should look forward to their future, I apologised to those young people.

My apology was based on being part of the political class that had allowed a set of circumstances that would reduce their life chances and opportunities compared with those that had been available to me and the generations before me—primarily the right to travel, live, work, receive healthcare and reside in any other part of the European Union, among other rights. We have had powerful contributions from several Members, and that is the crux of what we are trying to grapple with today.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I apologise to his colleagues that I missed the start of the debate. The reason was that, like the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who spoke a few minutes ago, I am a member of the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union, and some of us had the privilege of meeting a delegation from the Parliament of Slovakia who are in Westminster.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that he does not have to give a reason for intervening. Don’t worry about that; we just want to hear your intervention.

Peter Grant: It is highly relevant, Mr Deputy Speaker, because most of the people we met were born in the shadow of the iron curtain. They now have the right to travel all over western Europe and a great deal of central and eastern Europe. Does the hon. Gentleman share my bafflement that while those people are celebrating their fairly recently won right to travel everywhere, we have a Government here that seem determined to take measures that might endanger the right of future generations of UK citizens to travel as freely as our Slovakian friends can travel now?

Jonathan Edwards: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As always, he makes a very valid point. I congratulate him on the excellent work he is doing on the Select Committee. I was privileged to serve on that Committee with him in the last Parliament, and his contributions are always extremely valuable.

Much of the debate following the referendum has surrounded the economic impact of Brexit. There is little doubt in my mind that the best way to protect the Welsh economy is to stay inside the single market and the customs union, and that has been my position from day one. The issue of European Union citizenship rights of UK subjects, however, has not had the level of consideration it deserves.

At this point, I should pay tribute to Jill Evans, the Plaid Cymru MEP representing the whole of Wales who commissioned a report on that issue in the immediate aftermath of the referendum. Her work has gathered considerable support in the European Parliament—including, critically, from Guy Verhofstadt, the lead Brexit negotiator for the European Parliament. Indeed, I understand that the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), has had discussions with Mr Verhofstadt on that issue. I would be grateful to learn from the Minister in his response whether that issue was discussed yesterday with Mr Verhofstadt during
his visit to London. The idea has also gained the support of the European Parliament’s Committee on Constitutional Affairs.

I sense, perhaps wrongly, that the British Government have an open mind to what we are proposing today. I am being kind, because it has been a very good-natured debate so far. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, in response to the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy)—who I am delighted to see in his place and thank for his contribution, which hit the nail on the head—said:

“The aim of this exercise is to be good for Europe and good for Britain, which means good for the citizens of Europe and Britain. That is what we intend to do.”—[Official Report, 2 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 947.]

In her speech last Friday at Mansion House, the Prime Minister failed to provide any great clarity on some of the main issues that have concerned Members in relation to the British Government’s Brexit policy. However, a part of her speech did catch my attention, when she conceded that, despite her hard Brexit policy, she would seek to negotiate UK associate membership status with several EU agencies.

Anna Soubry: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the benefits of our remaining in the single market and the customs union. However, I disagree with him when he says that the Prime Minister’s policy is to have a hard Brexit. If one thing absolutely came out of the Mansion House, it was a firm rejection of a hard Brexit. Does he at least agree with me on that?

Jonathan Edwards: I am always delighted to hear from the right hon. Lady. With whom I work very closely on these matters. However, I fear that the Prime Minister in her speech managed to continue the strategy of trying to placate both sides of the Conservative party. Ultimately, she is going to have to make a call one way or the other. The fact that the right hon. Lady welcomed the speech and the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) welcomed the speech—

David T. C. Davies: And me.

Jonathan Edwards: The hon. Gentleman also did so. The fact that they both welcomed the speech leaves me concerned that the Prime Minister is not exactly making a definitive decision on those major issues, on which the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and I actually agree.

As I was saying, the Prime Minister conceded in her speech that she would seek associate membership of several EU agencies. If that is the case, why not apply the same principle to citizenship? Since Plaid Cymru launched our campaign on this issue at the weekend, my Twitter feed has become the location for a lively debate. Indeed, earlier this afternoon I was called a traitor by the hon. Member for Arfon. I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

As someone who fundamentally believes in Welsh independence, I recognise that, following the political freedom of my country, there will be a requirement to protect the rights currently enjoyed by the people of our respective countries, as was of course the case following Irish independence. I think that answers the point raised by the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton)—he is no longer in his place—in his intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Arfon.

In his article in The New European at the weekend, Professor Volker Roeben, who was formerly of the University of Swansea but now works in Dundee in Scotland—I am delighted to see him here—makes the case quite clearly that international and EU law should protect our current EU citizenship from Brexit. I understand that legal opinions differ and I readily admit that I am no legal expert, but he makes a compelling case. I would like to finish my speech by quoting him at some length. He said:

“Of course, a member state is free to terminate its membership for the future, but it cannot extinguish the citizenships that have already been created and the rights that have been exercised—these continue. This status cannot be taken away neither by the European Union nor by one of its member states.

This is also the impetus of the international law of treaties laid down in the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties. This international law will be binding on the EU, the UK and the remaining member states after Brexit. It governs in considerable detail the consequences that the withdrawal of a state from any treaty, including the Founding Treaties, entail.

One consequence is that the treaty ceases to bind, but the other is that the withdrawal must not have retroactive effect on the rights of individuals already created at the time of withdrawal.”

This results in a challenge to the European Commission and, as I readily admit, to the British Government. My understanding is that the European Parliament is far more understanding of the case than the Commission. If this is the case, then MEPs will have an important role in scrutinising the negotiating tactics of Mr Barnier and his team. At the end of the day, as Professor Roeben states, it is a matter of political will. I hope that,
following this debate, Parliament will support the motion and mandate the British Government to negotiate a protection of the rights we all currently enjoy as European citizens.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I now have to announce the results of today’s deferred Divisions. In respect of the question relating to Northern Ireland political parties, the Ayes were 308 and the Noes were 261, so the Ayes have it. In respect of the question relating to passport fees, the Ayes were 317 and the Noes were 258, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division lists are published at the end of today’s debates.]

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to make a correction to the record. This morning, I referred in a question to the Secretary of State for Scotland during Scotland questions to branch closures by RBS last month. Of the 10 branches given a reprieve last month on the basis that they were the last bank in town, two were not in fact the last branches in town. I suggested that the branch in Melrose, which is not the last bank in town, was in the Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale constituency, which is the constituency of the Secretary of State for Scotland. As a matter of fact, it is in the constituency of Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk. The other branch that is not the last branch in town is located in Kyle, which is in the Ross, Skye and Lochaber constituency, which is the constituency of the leader of the Scottish National party in Westminster. I would like to correct the record to that effect.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): The hon. Gentleman has made that correction.

4.6 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): May I, too, warmly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) and Plaid Cymru for bringing forward this timely and important debate?

Before I begin my remarks, I would like to declare a non-financial interest. For many years, I have been an honorary consul to Romania for the highlands and islands. I will come back to that later. It seems to me, as we are discussing the rights of European citizenship, that we should all declare our financial interests, as well as many more interests.

The concept of European citizenship was introduced in the 1992 Maastricht treaty, affording rights, freedoms and legal protections to all citizens, as well as giving a legal basis to European identity. Many of those rights are tied up with the four freedoms of the single market, as we heard earlier. European citizens have the right to live, work and study across the EU and associated countries. European citizens are free to trade and transport goods, services and capital through EU borders as in national markets, with no restrictions on capital movements or duty fees. Citizens have the right to vote and run as a candidate in local elections in the country where they live and in European elections, and to participate in the European citizens’ initiative. Citizenship of the EU confers the right of consular protection by embassies of other EU member states when a person’s country of membership is not represented by an embassy or consulate in the country in which they require protection. EU citizens have the right to vote for and petition the European Parliament, and the right to address themselves to the European ombudsman and EU agencies directly in their own language if the issues raised are within their competence. Finally, EU citizens enjoy legal protections under EU law, specifically through the charter of fundamental rights of the European Union and through Acts and directives regarding the protection of personal data, the rights of victims of crime, the prevention and combating of trafficking in human beings, equal pay and protection from employment discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, sexual orientation, age and other characteristics. Those are substantial rights for European citizens.

I was privileged to serve as the vice-president of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions, a fantastic organisation that brings together local authority areas from across Europe as far apart as Finland and the Azores. We discussed common issues across the European Union in order to get our points made as citizens of the EU about policy. It was a great privilege to do that. I travelled to that group as a European citizen with the rights I have outlined. I was never treated as an outsider or a foreigner, and none of the people I met during that time were ever foreign to me.

As an honorary consul, I have helped Romanian citizens in the highlands and islands, directing them to the support and services they might need. It has never involved my doing anything other than my job of helping people as an MP. It would be the same, and it is the same, for constituents who are Polish, French or German. I am sure we would all do the same. That point of contact has allowed me to build social and economic ties with our Romanian neighbours.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s work to support Romanians and other European citizens in my hometown of Inverness.

I welcome the fact that Plaid have brought this debate today, especially as I am a member of Plaid Cymru, as well as a member of the Scottish National party.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Dual citizenship!

Patrick Grady: Exactly! In that sense, I am a dual citizen as well. It just shows that we can all get along and perhaps these principles should be extended to everybody.

Drew Hendry: Absolutely. On the principle of extending European citizenship, this is deeper than just a set of rights. This is an historic tie, which we should cherish. That identity is very important to Scotland. We have always been a European nation and we continue to be a European nation.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is laying out the connections and ties we have been lucky enough to make across Europe. In 2005, I did an internship at the Committee of the Regions not long after the new accession states joined the EU. It was with great joy that I made new friends from Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and all the other new countries coming into the EU, who valued that citizenship and the links and ties they could make. Does he share my deep regret that we are no longer going to be a part of that shared project?
Drew Hendry: Absolutely, although I would say that the UK Government have it within their gift to ensure, certainly on the issue of European citizenship, that we remain a part of that project.

It is very important to understand the feeling in Scotland, which I know is shared by many people in Wales. I would like to quote from a leader in the *Sunday Herald*, which I think is particularly poignant:

“Scotland has been an outward looking European nation since the late middle ages. From the 16th century, Scots merchants, academics and soldiers spread far and wide in the continent establishing communities in countries like Poland, Sweden and the Low Countries. As a poor nation on Europe’s periphery it was Scotland’s lot to export its people, and the flow continued apace during the British Empire. But intellectual and commercial trade was very much two way. It is no accident that so many European words have entered the Scottish language, such as the Swedish ‘braw’, Dutch ‘kirk’, German ‘ken’, French ‘dour’. Our very language testifies to Scotland’s European connections.”

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I wonder if the hon. Gentleman would care to add to his list: soiree, meaning an evening out; gigot, meaning a leg of lamb; and ashet, on which we cut our lamb and which comes from assiette in French?

Drew Hendry: Yes, I would indeed. It is a list to which I could, if I had the time and perhaps the patience of Mr Deputy Speaker, add many more words that highlight that connection. [ Interruption. ] I am being encouraged to go for it, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I will move on.

That is the kind of place Scotland is and the kind of Scotland we want to live in. Our European identity and our shared values with the EU are very much at the heart of that. It is important to reflect that, during the referendum on the EU, 62% voted to remain in the EU and there was a majority to remain in all Scottish local authority areas, yet European Scots face not only the economic and social impacts of Brexit, but losing their European identity. A colleague of mine in the European Parliament, Alyn Smith, said:

“So what does Scotland have right now? Scotland has been an integral part of the EU for almost 50 years, a status that we now face losing. We are represented at every stage of the EU’s activities. The recreation, in 1999, of the Scottish Parliament and the formation of a Scottish Government gave Scotland a far stronger voice within the EU, and has allowed the people of Scotland to find Scottish solutions for Scottish problems and design a society that reflects our needs. This has led to Scotland showing how very European it really is. We stand alongside the rest of Northern Europe by not privatising healthcare, encouraging the development of renewable energy and not charging our citizens for higher education.”

Jeremy Lefroy: These rights are held dear not just in Scotland, but throughout the UK. Clause 41 of Magna Carta states:

“All merchants may enter or leave England unharmed and without fear, and may stay or travel within it, by land or water, for purposes of trade, free from all illegal exactions, in accordance with ancient and lawful customs.”

For trade, this goes back not just to the Bill of Rights, but to Magna Carta.

Drew Hendry: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and for pointing out that the situation looks as though it would have been easier in the time of Magna Carta than it will be if we lose our European citizenship. However, I want to reflect on the highlands and our relationship with European citizenship.

Anna Soubry: I suggest that one reason there was such a strong remain vote in Scotland was not just that, as the hon. Gentleman said, people think themselves more European than perhaps Britons—I do not agree with him about that—but that, as I think we can agree, there is a real understanding of the positive benefits of immigration. When I served on the Scottish Affairs Committee, it was striking that Scotland was crying out for more people to come in and work there. Does he think that the fact that the Scottish people have not been afraid to talk about the positive benefits of immigration may be a large part of the result north of the border?

Drew Hendry: The right hon. Lady has stolen my thunder slightly, because the fact that we have received many benefits was exactly where I was going to go next. The very next line of my speech—I am very grateful that she brought this up—is that the long-term issues in the highlands have not been about immigration, but about emigration. That has been a historical problem. Depopulation has been a critical issue in the highlands. Our deepened relationships with the EU have presented an opportunity to welcome EU Scots to our region, a great many of whom have settled in the area.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) highlighted the different attitude to migration, and that really needs to be underpinned by different migration policies and by Scotland being able to decide, as is the case in other countries such as Switzerland, where the 26 cantons can control half the visas. This issue does not have to be centrally controlled in London. In my constituency, I need fishermen to come from Ghana and the Philippines to fish. I cannot get them in, because a person in London often says no. We need a migration Minister with the courage to change that, and I hope we have this time.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I know that he shares my concerns about the unrealistic, counter-productive, one-size-fits-all net migration target that overlooks the incredible value of migrant people to our islands and the different economic needs of the highlands and islands, and of Scotland as a whole.

Over the next 10 years, 90% of Scotland’s population growth is projected to come from migration. This is especially vital for the highlands. Migration has created cultural and diverse communities that have tied us together, populated by many European Scots, solidifying our European identity. Twenty-one languages are spoken by pupils, for example, at Central Primary School in Inverness, such is the diversity of families settling in the highlands. European citizenship, whether it is our own or that of European citizens who are here, is very important for the economy—tourism accounts for 20% of the economy—as well as many other sectors. I could mention food processing, renewables, life sciences and so on, but I will not pause on those.

Drew Hendry: Of course, but to Magna Carta.

Jamiie Stone: In addition to what the hon. Gentleman says about migration to our country, Scotland, the historical emigration of Scots was a curse on the highlands for many years, but European investment in infrastructure, via schemes such as objective 1, helped halt—and indeed reverse—that, meaning that classmates of mine and...
younger generations stayed in the highlands, rather than seeking their fortunes outwith the beloved land they came from.

**Hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Drew Hendry:** Absolutely—hear, hear! The point about young people staying in the highlands is critical, but, conversely, their ability to move freely throughout Europe, gain skills and come back is also very important. I have personal experience of this. My two boys went off to work in Europe, gain skills and broaden their horizons. One has already come back to Scotland to add to our economy the skills he gained in Europe. As my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) mentioned, the ability of young people to travel through and study and work in Europe and to live as European citizens has been transformational, not just for them but for our economy—locally, in the highlands, across Scotland and, I contend, across the whole of the UK. We should cherish that. It should not be under threat.

**Peter Grant:** As a student, I not only benefited from the ability to travel in France and elsewhere but spent a month just outside my hon. Friend’s constituency working on a fruit farm in Beauty—which, of course, is French for “beautiful place”. Does he agree that, as well as people from the UK losing out if they cannot travel freely across Europe, if European citizens are restricted in their ability to come here, young people here will lose out on the benefits of mixing with people from a wide range of backgrounds, and as well as the free movement of people, the free movement of ideas and beliefs is vital and should be retained?

**Drew Hendry:** My hon. Friend makes a terrific point that we should pause to reflect on during this discussion, and it is not just about the ability of young people to interact in that way. I have often said that I aspire to be an older person and that I am making good progress—I have used that line before and will do so again. It is not just about young people; European citizenship is key to everyone’s ability to broaden their horizons.

Just today—ironically—there was an announcement about the introduction of free inter-rail travel across Europe. Young people face losing out on that; they face losing out on the end to roaming charges and consequently a loss of connectivity; and, as mentioned earlier, they face losing the European health protection that has enabled them to reduce the cost of living and studying.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is describing very eloquently the opportunities that his sons have had travelling through the EU. Is this not precisely a question of education and the opportunities our young people have to travel, and was not the Brexit vote particularly strong where educational opportunities were not very high? Rather than leaving the EU and restricting young people’s ability to go to the EU, is it not important that we extend educational opportunities to all young people in this country?

**Drew Hendry:** On the life chances that young people will have as they grow into adults and move through their careers, it is critical that every opportunity they get to broaden their horizons be embraced, and we should do everything possible to avoid anything that removes their ability to broaden their horizons, such as losing their EU citizenship.
Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Is this not the greatest tragedy of the way in which the Brexit negotiations are unfolding? The people who voted leave were not being given the Brexit for which they voted on the timescale for which they voted, but the biggest losers will be the people throughout the country—especially the young—whose opportunities will become far more limited because of the type of Brexit that is being pursued. Furthermore, every parent and grandparent in the country should reflect on the damage that is being done to the prospects of their children and grandchildren.

Anna McMorrin: That is an excellent point with which I completely agree. Indeed, I am about to speak about just that issue.

Brexit is an injustice that will take away rights without giving people the option to secure those rights in the long term for themselves and their children. The idea of European citizenship is cherished by those who are old enough to remember a time when Europe was going through a healing process. We seem to have forgotten that it was not always the peaceful, prosperous place that it is today: a union of people, not merely nations. It is a pity that there are elected politicians in this House who are unwilling to understand the strong feelings of many British people about their European identity.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is making a strong speech. Does she agree that many people, particularly in places like Cardiff where we have a strong and thriving university sector, see themselves much more as part of pan-European collaboration in science and driving forward progress in discovery, and key to that is their European Union citizenship? By taking that away we potentially do great damage to those relationships on a European level that are taking forward all sorts of exciting scientific discoveries.

Anna McMorrin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am proud to represent Cardiff North, and the whole of Cardiff is a diverse community. We have plenty of students from across the European nations, and we want to retain that feeling of European identity and citizenship.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making very important points. She mentioned the politics of this, and it used to be the case that the Conservatives supported the single market and these issues. I feel very strongly that Labour should fly the flag for citizens’ rights within the context of the single market. That is an incredibly important thing, and I hope that eventually my Front-Bench team will also recognise that the single market is the best way to offer these protections.

Anna McMorrin: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He knows my personal feeling, representing Cardiff North, which is a strong remain constituency: most of my constituents would love us to remain in the single market.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I too represent a university constituency, and I recognise the concerns raised by our young people who want to access the opportunities the EU gives them. We need to fight to ensure that opportunities continue after Brexit, but does the hon. Lady also recognise that this is very much a game of two halves: although many young people, particularly university students, could take up those opportunities, which are very welcome, many other young people from disadvantaged backgrounds would never have the money to be able to travel to Europe and could never take up those options, and their employment prospects were deeply damaged by their being undercut by the free movement of people across the EU?

Anna McMorrin: I beg to disagree with the hon. Lady. The best way to retain those opportunities for young people from all types of background—disadvantaged and not—is to keep those opportunities open and to work to be a citizen of the EU, and for the UK Government not to take us on the damaging Brexit course they are currently taking us on.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the hon. Lady for making a very important point. Does she agree that tens of thousands of young people from all parts of the UK and from all backgrounds have benefited, because the EU has allowed those from more disadvantaged backgrounds to get educational opportunities they would never otherwise have had?

Anna McMorrin: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I worked in Brussels for a time, as well as in other EU countries, and I can see the benefits for young people from all backgrounds.

This is about identity. It is about what we call ourselves in terms of our identity and citizenship. I call myself Welsh and European, and I will continue to do so in equal measure even after Brexit.

I urge the Government to look at the practical benefits of European citizenship, and to support demands to allow British people to continue to benefit from it. As I said, I lived, studied and worked in France, Spain and Belgium when I was younger. It is a shame to think that my two daughters will not be able to have those same experiences and opportunities because the UK Government did not think EU citizenship was worth fighting for. Brexit will do nothing more than isolate us as a nation and cut off those benefits and opportunities for our younger people.

To be Welsh and European is to be open and inclusive. The Welsh writer Gwyn Thomas expressed that beautifully when he said that south Wales society is “the most marvellously interpenetrating thing” where “everyone was sensitive and thin skinned to the problems of others”.

He described it as a “warm soup of comradeship, love, singing, understanding”. That is how we should consider citizenship of the whole European Union, and I urge this Government to have the courage to safeguard our citizenship as we exit the EU.

4.35 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What a pleasure it is to follow such a fantastic speech from the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin). I begin by commending and thanking our colleagues in Plaid Cymru for securing this debate. I believe that this is the
first time in history that Plaid Cymru has had its own Opposition day debate, and I hope that we will have more of them.

Most people who have taken part in this debate have declared an interest. I look up at the annunciator and see my German surname, and I am incredibly proud to be someone of German descent in this House. I am also incredibly proud to represent Scotland, where 62% of the population voted to remain in the European Union. All 32 local authority areas voted to remain, and my constituency voted remain. However, we see ourselves looking over the cliff-edge of a hard Brexit to which we have been driven by the Back Benches of the Conservative party, and it is something that Scotland did not vote for.

The points made during the debate, particularly by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), about the impact on young people really amplify the disaster that Brexit will be. I have questioned the Prime Minister about the Erasmus scheme, and she can give us certain guarantees about the next year or two. However, the reality is that a young person studying at Lochend Community High School in Easterhouse, a deprived area in my constituency, currently has the opportunity to travel and see other parts of Europe through Erasmus. That directly answers the point made by the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) about young people from deprived backgrounds.

Emma Little Pengelly: Just to build on that, my point was that, yes, it is fantastic that young people have such opportunities, and we have tried to encourage take-up in Northern Ireland, but I speak to many young people from deprived communities who have said, “We apply for job after job across the European Union.” There are record levels of NEETs—young people not in employment, education or training—and to understand what motivates people we must understand that those opportunities do not apply to everybody. We need to recognise that that was part of the challenges of the single market and free movement of people and part of why people were opposed to it.

David Linden: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that. I was dealing with two companies that have announced the closure of stores in my constituency because they are going into administration. One reason for that were the fluctuations in the pound due to the uncertainty caused by Brexit. We need to be absolutely clear about the need to protect jobs. I agree with the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) about the importance of a jobs-first Brexit, but the only way to achieve that is by ensuring that we stay in the single market and the customs union, so I very much hope that the hon. Member for Nottingham East manages to convince his Front-Bench colleagues.

Mr Leslie: That is good timing by the hon. Gentleman, because this afternoon the European Commission published its draft negotiation for the future relationship. One of the final paragraphs states that the European Union will be prepared to reconsider the idea of an FTA settlement if circumstances change and the situation evolves. The EU is saying that if the Government drop their ridiculous, self-imposed red lines on the customs union and the single market, it will allow us to have those benefits. I think that is the route we need to pursue.

David Linden: Absolutely. Unsurprisingly, I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman. The Prime Minister conceded yesterday that roaming charges will come back. The Government are spending all this time talking about taking back control, but they will not be taking back control of my phone bill the next time I go to Europe, because it is going to go through the roof.

These things were all put on the side of a bus, which brings me to my next point. When I went with my wife and son to the polling station to vote in the EU referendum, there was nothing on my ballot paper about leaving the single market and the customs union. Conservative Members spend a huge amount of time telling us that people knew what they were voting for. If that is the case, people thought they were voting for £350 million extra a week for the national health service, and we do not see much evidence of that happening.

My final point—I say this as someone who respects the will of Parliament—relates to the absence of certain Members who spend a huge amount of time talking about parliamentary sovereignty. I suspect that, once again, an Opposition day motion will pass. There is much in this motion that is absolutely commendable and I would be more than happy to support it in a Division. My challenge to hon. Members, particularly those with a Brexit background who claim that we are taking back control and empowering this place, and who say, “We must respect what the House of Commons says,” is to acknowledge that, when this motion passes, it is incumbent on the Government to support it and implement it. I very much hope that the Government will adhere to it and that they will not ignore Parliament. If they are serious about taking back control, that starts with listening to this House of Commons.

4.42 pm

Hywel Williams: Right hon. and hon. Members will forgive me if my comments are fairly brief, given my current condition. I am pleased to say that this has been
a high-quality debate, in contrast to the debate out in the country. We have heard positive contributions from about a dozen hon. Members. Perhaps that has something to do with the absence of the usual suspects, particularly on the Conservative Benches, who continually repeat the same tired arguments, to very little positive effect. I am gratified by the emphasis that so many hon. Members have put on the rights of young people, thus looking to the future, not to the past.

It is a somewhat novel idea for this place to talk about the continuation of European Union citizenship after we leave. It is not surprising, therefore, that Members have been tempted to wander away to questions about the rights of EU citizens living in the UK and to the Brexit question in general. I do not think that that has impeded or hampered the debate; it has been a suitable counterpoint.

In her initial response, the Minister for Immigration made her central point that when we leave the European Union, EU citizenship will lapse, but Opposition Members have clearly made the counter-argument that international law suggests the very opposite. I will take the opportunity yet again to draw attention to the report “The Feasibility of Associate EU Citizenship for UK Citizens Post-Brexit”, which argues the case clearly, based on the Vienna convention, specifically article 71(b).

I am glad that this has turned out to be a positive if shortish debate, and I look forward to hearing a positive response from the Government.

4.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I congratulate Plaid Cymru on its first Opposition day debate, the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) on tabling the motion and the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) on opening the debate with his usual eloquence, passion and power. I congratulate everyone who has contributed to a genuinely considered discussion on maintaining European Union citizenship for British nationals.

It is entirely proper that we debate issues relating to the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union, and the rights that we hold today as European citizens are an important aspect of that. I have heard many arguments from across the Chamber today as to why we should seek to secure some form of continuation of EU citizenship for British nationals after we withdraw from the European Union. I welcome the varied contributions made to this important debate, including the report by Jill Evans MEP and Swansea University, to which several colleagues referred.

I have listened closely to the arguments that the rights and protections held by individuals with EU citizenship are, in some cases, integral to their identity. We had a fascinating discussion about identity, and my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) spoke well about some of the complexities of that and how his constituency has been shaped by Europe in a different way from some others. I should say that the Prime Minister has made it clear, and I reiterate, that we are leaving the European Union; we are not leaving Europe. On this question of identity, at the end of this process we will still all be citizens of a European state.

Stephen Gethins: The motion says: “That this House supports the maintenance of European Union citizenship rights.”

Will the Minister confirm that if the motion is approved by the House, that will be part of his negotiating strategy?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting suggestion. I said that we listened carefully to the debate, and of course we always listen carefully to decisions of this House. In response to the calls from my colleagues in this House and the other place, and from Members of the European Parliament, to argue for the continuation of EU citizenship for UK nationals, let me say that, as my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration confirmed earlier, we will always be very happy to listen to any proposals on our exit from the European Union. However, as EU treaty provisions state that only citizens of EU member states are able to hold EU citizenship, when the UK ceases to be a member of the European Union, UK nationals will no longer hold EU citizenship, unless of course they hold dual nationality from another EU member state. It is important that we respect the EU’s legal order, and of course our own, when EU treaties and EU law no longer apply to the UK.

I wish to take this opportunity to respond on the doctrine of acquired rights, which I know the House of Lords EU Committee looked into, expressing some concern about the validity of acquired rights in this context. Article 70 of the Vienna convention was mentioned by a number of colleagues, including the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake). To be clear, article 70 is a “default” rule, which does not apply where the parties to a treaty agree arrangements relating to a particular party’s withdrawal. The UK and the EU will agree these arrangements under the article 50 process, to be defined in the withdrawal agreement. The argument on acquired rights under article 70 does not, therefore, apply in the context of these negotiations.

Hywel Williams: Can the Minister confirm that it is a matter of political will whether we retain those citizens’ rights?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. Of course it is a question of political decisions on both sides and respect for one another’s legal orders. The prospect of maintaining EU citizenship for UK nationals is not something that has been suggested to us to date in the negotiations, either by the European Commission or by any individual member state. Throughout the negotiations we have, however, put citizens at the heart of our approach.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the Minister not agree that the Prime Minister is proposing, in many ways, that we are going to see very new shores—for example, with the border without a border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland? If we are really looking for new opportunities, this would be exactly such an opportunity, where we are doing something that has not been done before.

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point. Of course, in our joint report we made specific commitments on the Irish border that we absolutely stand by.
It has been the Government’s policy from the very beginning to provide certainty and stability for UK citizens who have made their lives in the EU and for EU citizens here in the UK. As the Prime Minister set out at Mansion House last week, EU citizens are an integral part of the economic, cultural and social fabric of our county, which is why we made it a priority to secure in the first phase of the negotiations a fair deal on citizens’ rights that will allow for UK and EU citizens to continue their lives broadly as they do now.

As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration detailed earlier in the debate—

Liz Saville Roberts rose—

Mr Walker: I will give way to the hon. Lady after I have made this point, if I may.

The comprehensive agreement that we secured in December grants citizens certainty about a wide range of rights, including residents’ healthcare, which was highlighted by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), as well as pensions and other benefits. That means that UK nationals who are living in the EU at the point of exit will continue to benefit from rights that stem from their EU citizenship today. After our exit, those rights will be provided for by the withdrawal agreement, which will enshrine them and take the status of international law, having direct effect in EU member states. They will also be written into UK law by Parliament, through the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill.

Liz Saville Roberts: I hope the Minister will forgive me for taking him back to a point he made earlier, but if the proposal for the citizens of Northern Ireland is suitable for them, why is it not suitable for the citizens of Wales, Scotland and England?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady raises a good point. She touched on some of the history in her speech and I was very interested in her historical references. There are long-standing commitments that the UK has made to the citizens of all of Ireland, and we built on those in the Belfast Good Friday agreement. I shall return to them towards the end of my speech. We have to recognise that those provisions were brought about by unique circumstances that date back long before our membership of the EU.

The Government have shown that we have listened to calls to provide certainty to EU citizens in the UK, by ensuring that citizens will be able to rely directly on the rights enshrined in the withdrawal agreement through the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill, which will be introduced to Parliament after the withdrawal agreement has been finalised. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration mentioned, we have listened to feedback from communities throughout the UK on the process of acquiring settled status. We have been clear that the new application scheme will be digital, streamlined and user-friendly. We are consulting regularly with EU citizens’ user groups and employers as we design the system.

On the point made by the hon. Member for North East Fife, we will make sure that those who undertake overseas postings, including military service in our armed forces, will not be disadvantaged.

Stephen Doughty: I hope I can tempt the Minister back to the rights that UK citizens currently have as EU citizens. He said a few moments ago that he had not been suggested in the negotiations, but Guy Verhofstadt has been clear that he believes that UK citizens would be able to retain their EU citizenship rights on an individual basis. What does the Minister have to say about that clear proposal?

Mr Walker: As the hon. Member for Arfon mentioned earlier, I have personally discussed this issue with Guy Verhofstadt. I put it to him that we are negotiating with the Commission, so he needs to make that point to the Commission. If he wishes that to be part of the negotiations, it needs to be discussed in that context. After his meeting in Downing Street this week, Guy Verhofstadt said:

“I think it is possible in the coming days and coming weeks we make progress on this”

issue for citizens

“and we can conclude on this...It should be fine that the citizens rights’ chapter is done, it is finished, it is concluded and everybody knows UK nationals and EU citizens know what their status is in the future.”

I welcome that statement.

Some colleagues have referred to rights that are not covered by the agreement we have reached so far—for example, the right of onward movement for UK nationals. The EU’s approach so far has been to say that it is not an issue that can be resolved in this phase of the negotiations, but we have had meetings on the topic with Members of the European Parliament, and I know that they are as keen as we are to secure that right. It is not something on which we have in any way given up.

Other colleagues, including the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd, referred to the right to stand and vote in local and national elections. I stress that we wanted that right to continue—we would have liked it to be part of the citizens’ rights agreement—but the European Commission again ruled that it was outside the scope of the first stage of the negotiations. We have made a commitment to protect that right for EU citizens currently in the UK, and we want to see that to be reciprocated. A number of member states already have provisions allowing nationals of a third country to vote in local elections, and we will continue to explore that with other member states bilaterally.

The hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) mentioned plans to legislate to enable UK citizens living overseas for more than 15 years to retain their right to vote. I am sure that, like me, she welcomed the Government’s support for legislation of this nature just the Friday before last.

As the House will be aware, we are seeking to agree an implementation period of about two years beyond the date of our exit. The purpose of such a period is to give people, businesses and public services in the UK and across the EU the time they need to put in place new arrangements that will be required to adjust to our future partnership. I want to be clear that, during this implementation period, we intend that people will be able to come to the UK to live, study and work, as they do now. We are discussing the precise terms of the implementation period with the EU and we aim to reach agreement by the March European Council.
Mr Walker: My hon. Friend and neighbour is absolutely right. We want reciprocal rights and reciprocal respect for one another’s political and legal systems.

We recognise that, in the future, as the hon. Member for Arfon noted, UK citizens will still want to work and study in EU countries, just as EU citizens will want to do here, helping to shape and drive growth, innovation and enterprise. None the less, the people of the United Kingdom did choose to leave the EU, and, as he pointed out, Wales voted by a majority to leave. As a result of that decision, the EU treaties will no longer apply to the United Kingdom and the Government have been clear that freedom of movement will come to an end.

I listened with interest to the part of today’s debate that dealt with suggestions for our continued membership of the single market. We accept that there is a balance of rights and responsibilities in the treaties and that, in choosing to leave the EU, we will put those rights in a new and different balance. We understand and respect the indivisible nature of the four freedoms, which is why leaving the EU and ending free movement and the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice does mean leaving the single market.

The Government propose a unique and ambitious partnership, which will be based on our rules and regulations being the same from the start and on maintaining our commitment to free trade and high standards, while allowing us to both make changes when we want to in a stable and orderly way, as my hon. Friend just said, with respect for one another’s systems. The exact shape of this future relationship has yet to be negotiated, but as the Prime Minister noted last week, we recognise the need to maintain the social, economic and cultural links between our people and ensure that businesses can attract and employ the people they need. That is why we are taking an evidence-based approach to our future immigration policy—something that the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) managed to both call for and rail against at the same time. We commissioned an independent advisory body, the MAC, to gather evidence on patterns of EU migration and its role in the wider economy. That will include consideration of the impacts on the different parts of the UK, within the context of designing a UK-wide immigration system.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Just to clarify, my point was about the Government’s inaction on bringing forward legislation.

Mr Walker: If the hon. Gentleman wants to take an evidence-based approach, he has to make sure that his legislation is based on that evidence and the studies that are being conducted. He also suggested that the CBI had been critical of the Government. In fact, the CBI welcomed our recent announcement on citizens’ rights during the implementation period. Its director general said that this is “a big step in the right direction”, and that: “This announcement will remove significant short-term uncertainty for family, businesses and wider communities.”

We have also listened carefully to the evidence.

Nick Thomas-Symonds rose—

Mr Walker: I do want to move on, because I realise that I am taking a bit of time, but I will give way one last time to the hon. Gentleman.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way once again, but the quote from the CBI was about the inaction on the Immigration Bill, when the CBI declared itself to be hugely frustrated.

Mr Walker: The CBI is a key consultee of the MAC process; I am sure that it wants to play a full part in the process and to make sure that the legislation, when it comes forward, is based on the evidence.

Talking of listening to the evidence, I listened carefully to hon. Members in this debate when they talked about young people’s opportunities to study and to travel, and about the benefits of working together on issues such as science and research. We set out in our “Collaboration on science and innovation: a future partnership paper” a strong ambition to continue to co-operate and collaborate with EU member states, and indeed the many third-country members of its framework programmes, in that area. The Prime Minister spoke in Florence about maintaining the educational, cultural and scientific links between us and fellow members.

David Linden: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; he is being most generous. May I press him on the point that I raised with the Prime Minister? At the time that a second-year student now at Lochend Community High School in my constituency leaves school and goes to university, will they still be able to take part in Erasmus?

Mr Walker: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the current Erasmus programme is covered by the current multi-annual financial framework of the European Union, which ends in 2020. We need to look at what future frameworks would look like and how negotiations would approach the issue in future, but we have already set out a very positive UK position. We look forward to engaging with the EU on many issues, as part of the discussions of our future partnership.

In the debate, there was some discussion of the powers of devolved Administrations to act on citizens’ rights. I should make it clear that we are committed to securing a deal that works for the entire United Kingdom—for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and all parts of England. We expect the outcome of leaving the European Union to be a significant increase in the decision-making power of each devolved Administration. I look forward to discussing that further when I attend the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations) tomorrow. The deal secured in December is, of course, without prejudice to the common travel area between the UK and Ireland and...
the rights of British and Irish citizens in each other’s countries. We stand by our commitments in the Belfast agreement, one of which is that the people of Northern Ireland have the right to choose to be British, Irish or both. Maintaining those rights means that the people of Northern Ireland will not be required to assert and choose a specific identity in order to access public services and other entitlements. Their rights to work, study and access social security and public services will be preserved on a reciprocal basis.

I am grateful for the time and contribution of all Members to this important debate. I have listened carefully to the points that have been raised across the House. Whilst associate citizenship is not within the current scope of negotiations, I reiterate that I will always be happy to listen to proposals from colleagues or our European counterparts on how we can best safeguard the rights of UK nationals.

I want to be clear that at every step of these negotiations, we will work to secure the best possible deal for all UK nationals, including those currently living in the EU and those who wish to travel to the EU in future. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has repeatedly made clear, although we are leaving the European Union, we are not leaving Europe. I remind colleagues that the concept of EU citizenship only appeared in the Maastricht treaty of 1993. We were citizens of Europe long before Maastricht, and while we may now be leaving the political structures of the European Union and its treaties, we will not be any less European as a result.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House supports the maintenance of European Union citizenship rights for Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish and English citizens, notes that the range of rights and protections afforded to individuals as European Union citizens are integral to a person’s European identity; further notes that many of those rights are closely linked to the UK’s membership of the Single Market; and calls on the UK Government to ensure that the UK’s membership of the Single Market and UK citizens’ right to European Union citizenship are retained in the event that the UK leaves the EU.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. At Prime Minister’s questions today, the Leader of the Opposition stated that British armed forces were directing the attacks in Yemen. I checked with No. 10 Downing Street and that is completely incorrect. British armed forces personnel are not involved in any way at all with what is going on in Yemen or Saudi Arabia. We are about to discuss our armed forces, and I feel that comments like that could actually be putting our armed forces at risk. I wondered whether you had had any indication that the Leader of the Opposition is going to come to the House to apologise and put the record straight.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): First of all, it is not a matter for the Chair, as you well know. You have put it on the record, but it is certainly not for the Chair to intervene, either on behalf of the Opposition or the Prime Minister.

Hywel Williams: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will be very glad to be able to tell our European friends that this House now supports the idea of maintaining European Union citizenship rights. This follows the motion passed by the Brussels Parliament in March 2017, which also supported the idea of continuing associate EU citizenship for British nationals post Brexit. I seek your confirmation that as this motion has now passed, the Government must respond with a statement in this place on this matter within the next 12 weeks.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Obviously it is not a matter for the Chair. It is a matter for the Government to respond. The vote has been taken. The House has shown its view, but it is for the Government to respond accordingly.
5.4 pm

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson** (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I beg to move.

That this House recognises the valuable contribution made by men and women from Northern Ireland to our armed forces, including some of the best recruited Reserve Units in the UK and reaffirms its commitment to ensure that the Armed Forces Covenant is fully implemented in Northern Ireland.

I am delighted to move the motion in the name of my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Democratic Unionist party. As a party, we are proud of the contribution made by the men and women from Northern Ireland who have served the United Kingdom in many theatres of conflict across the globe and, indeed, especially in Northern Ireland itself. We salute their sacrifice, but also the sacrifice of all members of our armed forces, who courageously serve this country in many ways and in many parts of the world.

It is estimated that some 300,000 military personnel were deployed in Northern Ireland in the course of Operation Banner, which was the longest-running military operation in the history of the British Army. A significant proportion of the veterans who served in Operation Banner currently reside in Northern Ireland. That includes between 56,000 and 60,000 who served with the Ulster Defence Regiment or the Royal Irish Regiment Home Service Battalions, as well as many other units with which Ulster men and women served in the course of Operation Banner.

The Ulster University is currently conducting a study to identify the number of veterans resident in Northern Ireland and requiring welfare support. The initial reports published by the research team at the university make interesting reading, and I commend them to Ministers and the team at the Ministry of Defence. The reports and the research undertaken by the Ulster University provide an interesting insight into the needs of veterans in Northern Ireland and seek to quantify the extent of that need.

In addition to Operation Banner, we have an increasing proportion of armed forces personnel from Northern Ireland who have been deployed on operations in other parts of the world, including Iraq and Afghanistan, and other places such as Mali, Sierra Leone and so on. They include many members of our reserve units in Northern Ireland. I note that the Minister responsible for reserves, the right hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), is in his place. I pay tribute to our reserve forces in Northern Ireland. We have some of the best-recruited reserve units in the United Kingdom, such as the 2nd Battalion Royal Irish Regiment, which is headquartered at Thiepval barracks in my constituency in Lisburn. It is one of the best-recruited infantry reserve units in the United Kingdom. We have HMS Hibernia, following a proud tradition of Ulster men and women who have served with the Royal Navy, which is also based at Thiepval barracks in my constituency, and 502 Ulster Squadron of the Royal Air Force, located at Aldergrove, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan). We will soon be joining them in celebrating the centenary of the formation of the Royal Air Force.

We commend the men and women who have given up valuable time to serve in our reserve units and those who leave their families to go and serve with the regular armed forces, in many parts of the world.

**Lady Hermon** (North Down) (Ind): Does the right hon. Gentleman share the painful disappointment that I feel that there are so few Members on the Government and Opposition Benches this afternoon for this important debate, bearing in mind the enormous sacrifice made by so many members of the British Army, particularly those in the UDR, who were often part-time farmers who gave their lives and paid the ultimate sacrifice during the troubles in Northern Ireland? I personally have to say how disappointed I am that there is not a better turnout for today’s debate.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** I thank the hon. Lady for that comment. It is my experience in this House—this is my 21st year as a Member of Parliament—that, across the House of Commons, I find nothing but respect for our armed forces, especially those who have served in Northern Ireland. When I have attended events here in Parliament where we have remembered that sacrifice, I have always been struck by the depth of the gratitude felt by right hon. and hon. Members for that service, notwithstanding the disappointment that the hon. Lady feels at the attendance today, although that is not untypical for debates here of any kind. I do not honestly believe that it reflects any disrespect on the part of this House for the men and women who serve and have served in our armed forces.

A recent report published by the World Health Organisation on post-traumatic stress disorder found that Northern Ireland has a higher incidence of PTSD and trauma-related illnesses than other conflict-related country in the world. That includes places such as Lebanon and Israel. Remarkably, the study found that nearly 40% of people in Northern Ireland had been involved in some kind of conflict-related traumatic incident. The survey estimated that violence had been a distinct cause of mental health problems for about 18,000 people in Northern Ireland.

Against that backdrop, the health and social care system in Northern Ireland has sought to provide support and treatment service to people with mental health problems, and especially ones linked to trauma, but I have to say that it is struggling to cope with the pressures. As Ministers will know, it is often the case for service personnel that PTSD does not really make an impact for several years or more after the original incident. We are therefore seeing a pattern in Northern Ireland now of those who served in our armed forces developing mental health problems in later life, as well as physical injury-related medical problems, and that is putting real pressure on local health services. We feel that that needs to be more closely addressed.

Of course, that is not unique to the armed forces—the civilian population in Northern Ireland suffered dreadfully, and there is ample evidence of a high incidence of post-conflict trauma among the civilian population—but it highlights why the armed forces covenant is very important in Northern Ireland. It is perhaps more important in Northern Ireland than in some other parts of the United Kingdom, because it is essential that the men and women who have served our nation get the support that they require.
I am concerned, as a Member of Parliament, that I am dealing on a regular basis with veterans of Operation Banner who find themselves in trouble with the law because they have developed post-traumatic mental health problems and sadly get caught up in behavioural difficulties that perhaps are not entirely of their making but often result in them falling foul of the law. That is an increasing phenomenon, yet our mental health services do not appear to be adequately resourced to cope with it.

We feel that there is a need to do something. I know that my colleagues in the Northern Ireland Assembly have been pressing for a specialist and properly resourced unit to address some of the issues linked to mental health and what we call the troubles in Northern Ireland. Those who serve in the armed forces in particular need that support, and they are not getting the level of support that they require, so that is an important element of the armed forces covenant.

The current arrangements in Northern Ireland tend to vary from those in other parts of the United Kingdom, partly due to the constraints of our peculiar form of devolved government in Northern Ireland. The point is this: until just over a year ago, we had a power-sharing Executive in Northern Ireland comprising two main parties, one being the Democratic Unionist party and the other being Sinn Féin, and frankly, Sinn Féin has a difficulty when it comes to the armed forces covenant. It has declined to recognise the covenant and the idea that it has a responsibility for implementing the covenant, and its Ministers in charge of Departments have at times resisted efforts on our part to see the very modest objectives of the covenant implemented in Northern Ireland.

I remind the House that the core principle of the covenant is to ensure that those who have served in our armed forces are not disadvantaged by virtue of that service when it comes to the provision of healthcare, housing, education and so on. It is not that they are given special treatment or that they are advantaged over the rest of society, but that they are not disadvantaged. Yet the attitude of Sinn Féin to our armed forces means that, frankly, they are being disadvantaged in Northern Ireland. They are not getting the support that they deserve and require when it comes to healthcare treatment.

I have recently dealt with cases in my own constituency of those who have served in the armed forces, but who are languishing on waiting lists—ever increasing waiting lists, sadly, in Northern Ireland—and cannot get access to treatment. When they seek to get treatment that could be available to them in other parts of the United Kingdom, they are told, “We will not fund your travel, and we will not fund your accommodation to have this treatment in Birmingham or Manchester”. They would be entitled to receive such treatment if they lived in, for example, the constituency of my colleague the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn). We believe that this issue needs to be addressed.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Armed forces veterans and their families are an integral part of the community that I represent, and many of them served in Northern Ireland. They would like better provision of services for them in St Helens, but they certainly feel that the colleagues whom they served alongside in Northern Ireland should not be disadvantaged just because of where they live. Like me, they fully support the armed forces covenant being extended fully to Northern Ireland.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and, if I may say so, for the interest that he has taken over the years in matters pertaining to Northern Ireland and those who have served in the armed forces, which is greatly appreciated.

I want to give credit where it is due, and in fairness to the Government, we do have the Royal Irish Regiment aftercare service in Northern Ireland. It was established specifically to provide welfare support to those who have served in the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment Home Service. It is a valuable aftercare service, and it is valued by those who have benefited from it. The difficulty we have is that the life of the Royal Irish Regiment aftercare service is approaching its end date, and there is no indication from the Government that it will be renewed.

I am concerned about that, because the service provides valuable support to those who have served. As I have said, somewhere in the region of 55,000 to 60,000 veterans have served in the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment Home Service battalions. If we lose the Royal Irish Regiment aftercare service and the joined-up approach it brings to providing welfare support to veterans, that will increase the deficit in support for veterans in Northern Ireland. I look to the Government—I am happy to meet Ministers to discuss the need for this again—to extend the work of the Royal Irish Regiment aftercare service beyond the end of the period for which it was originally established.

If I may, I will concentrate a little more on what I see as the kernel of the problem. When the Northern Ireland Act 1998 was passed by this House, and by this Parliament, following the Belfast agreement, section 75 dealt with the whole issue of equality in Northern Ireland. It identifies a number of groupings within our society in Northern Ireland where there should be the promotion of equality of opportunity, including “between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group...between men and women...between persons with a disability and persons without; and...between persons with dependants and persons without.”

I would like to see veterans of our armed forces added as a specific group to the list of those for whom it is a requirement of every Department in Northern Ireland to promote equality of opportunity. That would at least move us in the right direction of addressing the deficit by identifying veterans as a group that ought to be provided with support when they need it, and it would compel Ministers in Departments in Northern Ireland to act in accordance with the objectives of the armed forces covenant.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one big benefit of adding that group to section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 is that it would introduce a requirement for every Government policy to be screened for its impact on that group? Whether it was an educational or health policy, there would be mandatory screening of its impact on armed forces personnel and their families. That would put policy makers across all Departments in a much more informed position to ensure that the needs of armed forces personnel and their families are integrated at the earliest possible opportunity in policy making.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I regard my hon. Friend as an expert on this issue, having worked with her in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.
She has devoted a lot of time and energy to promoting this kind of provision right across our society, not least in respect of veterans and the victims and survivors of our troubled past.

I refer the House to paragraph 36 of the Defence Committee report, “The Armed Forces Covenant in Action? Part 1: Military Casualties”, which states:

“The provisions of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 prevents the Department of Health...and the Health and Social Care...sector in Northern Ireland in providing war veterans with priority over other individuals with respect to healthcare treatment.”

The use of the term “priority” refers, of course, to ensuring that people are not disadvantaged by virtue of their service, rather than to jumping the waiting list queue—that is not what veterans are asking for. What veterans are asking for is not to be disadvantaged by virtue of their service. It is evident even in the findings of the Defence Committee that that happens. This is something that has been identified not just by the Democratic Unionist party but by other colleagues in this House.

Lady Hermon: It is very kind of the right hon. Gentleman to allow me to intervene again. He will know very well that we have the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and, quite separately from that, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. Will he take a few moments to explain to the House whether either, or indeed both, of those commissions support the extension of section 75 to include veterans? That would be very helpful for the House.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. I have met the Equality Commission about this issue, but I am not sure that I have met the Human Rights Commission. As far as I am aware, they tend to take the view that they do not believe that section 75 presents the problem that we believe exists. However, I have ample evidence to support our view that it is an impediment, even if it is based on perception rather than reality. We believe that amending section 75 would clear up any question of ambiguity on this issue and offer clarity, as my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) said, on policy development across all Departments. We urge the Government to examine the potential to amend section 75 for that purpose.

I refer the House to the “Report of the Task Force on the Military Covenant”, which stated that service personnel based in Northern Ireland

“are disadvantaged more than their contemporaries elsewhere... For example, Service families in the province are prevented from identifying themselves as such due to the security situation. This can cause difficulties for partners in explaining their career history to prospective employers and for Service children in obtaining the necessary support in schools”.

I have found that to be the case. I know that we have come a long way from the dark days of our troubled past, but there remains in Northern Ireland a culture of fear when it comes to openly identifying as someone who serves with the armed forces or as a family member of someone who does so. We cannot ignore that that is the reality of the experience of many serving personnel and veterans of the armed forces in Northern Ireland.

In addition, we believe there is substance in the call by many veterans in Northern Ireland for the establishment of a specialist facility to offer support to veterans. I commend, on behalf of my party, the excellent work of many of the military-linked charities in Northern Ireland. The Royal British Legion raises more money in Northern Ireland through its poppy appeal than any other region of the United Kingdom. We have SSAFA and Combat Stress, which does excellent work with limited resources while struggling to cope with the demand on its services. ABF the Soldiers’ Charity and others all do excellent work, but we would like to see a specialist facility established in Northern Ireland to bring together the resources needed to offer welfare support to veterans. That centre might be supported by some of the charities to which I have referred.

I want to make reference to community covenants in Northern Ireland. The Minister will know that they are an integral part of the armed forces covenant. I am delighted to report that since we last debated this issue in the House of Commons, a number of our new—not so new now, I suppose—district councils have adopted the community covenant, including Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council in my own constituency, and Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council. We welcome this development, because it means that local communities are now able to become more involved in providing support to the armed forces community and veterans. This will help to change the culture around our service personnel and veterans, and help them to see that the community is behind them, offering support at local government level.

I want to draw my remarks to a close by summarising what we would like the Government to do to ensure the full implementation of the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland. I remind the House that this was part of the confidence and supply agreement between the Democratic Unionist party and the Conservative party. We identified full implementation of the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland as a priority for the Government. In that context, I repeat our call for the aftercare service currently operated by the Royal Irish Regiment in Northern Ireland, a vital welfare support service for those who served in the Ulster Defence Regiment and Royal Irish Regiment Home Service, to be extended, with consideration given to enhancing the level of support available to veterans in Northern Ireland who did not serve in the UDR and Royal Irish Home Service but who are equally deserving of welfare support.

Secondly, we want the Government to amend section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to make specific provision for veterans of our armed forces to ensure that Government Departments and agencies in Northern Ireland have to have regard to the needs of veterans in bringing forward and implementing policies. We believe that in the absence of a devolved Government, that is the right way forward to ensure Government Departments and agencies in Northern Ireland are delivering for veterans, and have a requirement to take account of the needs of veterans in developing their policies.

One of the reports commissioned by the former Prime Minister, on transitioning for veterans, recommended that the Government appoint an armed forces champion in Northern Ireland. I know that this has been talked about, but we would like to see the proposal taken
forward. We continue to encourage our local councils to adopt the community covenant. We hear so much about respect from our absent colleagues in Sinn Féin, but the councils in Northern Ireland dominated by Sinn Féin have yet to adopt the community covenant. I think that this disrespects the men and women from Northern Ireland who serve in our armed forces. If Sinn Féin wants to be taken seriously on respect, it could take this step. This does not require Stormont. It does not require an Assembly. It does not require an Executive. Every council on which Sinn Féin has a strong presence could, right now, bring forward a proposal to adopt the community covenant. That would show real respect to the men and women who serve in our armed forces.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it gives me great pleasure this afternoon to move this motion in the name of the Democratic Unionist party.

5.30 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): Let me begin by congratulating the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on his remarks. He is very much a champion for veterans in Northern Ireland, as indeed are so many of his party. His passion for this subject is well known and certainly came across in his speech. I join him in paying tribute to the enormous service and sacrifice of all the members of our armed forces from Northern Ireland.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the absence of some colleagues. I say with the greatest respect to the shadow Labour Northern Ireland Ministers on the Front Bench that the absence of any shadow Defence Ministers has not gone unnoticed by the House. I am absolutely sure that that is not meant as any disrespect to the House. None the less it is a certain disappointment, considering the subject of our debate.

This year in particular, we remember the unparalleled contribution of Northern Ireland veterans to the spring offensive on the western front a century ago. We also recall their heroism in more recent operations, from the turmoil of the troubles to operations in Afghanistan and against Daesh extremists in Iraq. It has been my privilege to serve alongside many soldiers from Northern Ireland. Their passion and commitment has always been exemplary. As a reservist, I note with pride that more than twice as many Northern Irish citizens volunteer for the reserves, compared with the national average. For example, 502 Squadron Royal Auxiliary Air Force was only founded in 2012 but has grown rapidly to a strength of some 130. Alongside the other regular and reserve units across Northern Ireland, they embody the potent mix of our armed forces.

We are determined to ensure that all those who serve with our armed forces have the support that they need, from whatever part of the United Kingdom they come. In discussing these issues, we should start by recognising that veterans who live in Northern Ireland are entitled to receive the same level of support from the Ministry of Defence as those who live in England, Scotland and Wales. If any member of the armed forces, past or present, or their family wishes to access our recently launched veterans’ gateway or our new freephone Combat Stress mental health helpline, they can do so.

As hon. Friends will be aware, the covenant is a promise not just from Defence, but from the whole Government on behalf of our nation. It is a recognition that every part of our nation has a moral obligation to help those who lay their lives on the line for us—a duty to guarantee that no one who is serving, or who has served, for this country should suffer any disadvantage as a result of that service in relation to the rest of society. The covenant, however, is not prescriptive. Its voluntary nature means that there has never been a one-size-fits-all approach. Different parts of the country take a different approach, tailored to their particular circumstances. In the case of Northern Ireland, the covenant is being applied in a manner that suits the unique nature of its circumstances.

Four years on from the last time that we debated this subject, I am pleased to see that progress has been made, as the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley acknowledged. I had the great pleasure of visiting Northern Ireland twice last year, when I was the Minister responsible for veterans and personnel. I saw at first hand the needs of the armed forces community there and the commendable work being undertaken on behalf of our personnel. I also had the enormous pleasure of attending Armed Forces Day in the constituency of the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), who has also been a sterling champion for veterans and members of the armed forces for many a year in Bangor.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way because it allows me to put on the record how delighted and proud we were that he was present in Northern Ireland, which is an integral part of the United Kingdom, for Armed Forces Day, and we hope he has kept the instructions on how to get back, because although the Prime Minister only has time to come occasionally, it is wonderful when MOD Ministers come and remind everyone there that Northern Ireland is indeed an integral part of the United Kingdom.

Mark Lancaster: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I was actually in Northern Ireland a couple of weeks ago, as indeed was my right hon. Friend the veterans Minister, who was there for Remembrance Sunday.

Whether it is the work of the newly formed Veterans Support Office, operating in tandem with the Confederation of Service Charities to improve co-ordination between statutory bodies and service charities; the work of veterans champions, located in each of the 11 local authorities in Northern Ireland and linked with the VSO, tirelessly keeping the concerns of personnel in the community spotlight; or the work building on the bespoke aftercare service referred to by the right hon. Gentleman and provided by the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish, after referral from the Regional Personnel Recovery Unit within 38 (Irish) Brigade, there is plenty going on, but as we have heard, that is not to pretend that there are not still significant challenges to overcome.

When I visited Northern Ireland last March, I also had the sombre privilege of meeting some of those who had served during the troubles and, as a result, suffered from profound mental health issues. It is a reminder that for too many veterans living in Northern Ireland the scars of experience remain all too raw, as was sadly highlighted by the right hon. Gentleman. That is why the MOD is supporting the Ulster University study, funded by the Forces in Mind Trust, into the needs of the Northern Ireland service community.
At the same time, we know that there is a need to continue raising awareness of the help already out there and, in particular, the different ways to access funding. We have already seen the LIBOR veterans fund providing £600,000 for the Somme nursing home in Belfast, and small grants have been made to support community integration projects and recreation facilities for the armed forces community in Northern Ireland. By comparison with other parts of the UK, however, applications for covenant funding remain low. That is why we have committed to providing £300,000 over five years to improve the capacity and capability of local authorities and other bodies in Northern Ireland to bid for covenant funding.

Some hon. Members will feel we should go further still—some might suggest it is time to introduce further statutory instruments to increase uptake—but although I am ready to listen to the arguments on a case-by-case basis, I would make the point that the problem is not about the lack of mechanisms. Let us not forget, as has been mentioned, that besides the instruments already in place, there is section 75. I listened very carefully to what the right hon. Gentleman said, but it is a cornerstone of the Belfast agreement. It is about more than the avoidance of discrimination: it charges public authorities to actively seek ways to encourage greater equality of opportunity and good relations. It is the view of the Government that the armed forces covenant does not contravene section 75. As was highlighted by the exchange between the right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for North Down, that is also the view of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: For the purpose of clarity, my contention is not that the armed forces covenant contravenes section 75; it is that Government Departments in Northern Ireland believe that implementing the covenant may contravene it. I believe, therefore, that adding veterans as a clear category in section 75 would provide the clarity required to put this beyond doubt.

Mark Lancaster: As ever, the right hon. Gentleman makes his point in a perfectly reasonable manner. He should be reassured that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was here when he made that point earlier, and I know that she took on board his comments. Perhaps, for now, he should seek some reassurance in that.

For me, even more important than the legal devices is the willingness of different groups across Northern Ireland—local authorities, businesses and the third sector—to come together and partner up. Slowly but surely, we are seeing that start to happen, but we need to accelerate the process and encourage different organisations to combine their resources and raise awareness of the help on offer. On that note, I should add that if Members are aware of any disadvantage suffered by members of the armed forces in Northern Ireland, they should report it to me or to colleagues in the Ministry of Defence so that we can attempt to address them quickly.

Let me reassure Members, and every single man and woman in our armed forces, that we are utterly committed and determined to ensure that all those who have contributed so much to our nation continue to receive the support that they deserve. In the four years since our last debate, much has already improved, but today’s debate will only spur us on in our quest to extend the protection of the covenant to all.

5.40 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a great pleasure, and an honour, for me—as shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—to respond to the debate on behalf of Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition. The fact that members of our defence team are not present implies no disrespect on the part of the Labour Front Bench. They will be coming along shortly, and I am sure that they will take great interest in the debate.

Let me make clear at the outset that we are 100% in favour of the armed forces covenant. It is an excellent measure, introduced by the present Government; they built on the superb work done by the previous Labour Government, whose initial military covenant was passed in 2000. It is an important part of the way in which we as a country acknowledge the excellent service, and sacrifice, of members of our armed forces, not only in Northern Ireland but all over the world. The Labour party is four-square behind it, and four-square behind its equal application throughout the United Kingdom.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), who opened the debate so eloquently, for his consistent support for armed forces members and veterans, and for consistently raising the question of potential anomalies between the application of the covenant in Northern Ireland and its application in the rest of the United Kingdom, which he has done with great vigour and sincerity.

While I acknowledge the Minister’s contention that there might be security and political reasons for the different application of the covenant in Northern Ireland—which echoed what has been said by previous Conservative Defence Ministers—the reality is that some differences are not just about security and politics. There are administrative and legal differences between the framework in Northern Ireland and the framework in the rest of the UK, and there is the question of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which was raised by the right hon. Member for North Down, and which I hope to address later in my speech.

It should also be borne in mind that there is a particular set of problems for some representatives of the armed forces. There are Northern Ireland veterans who went through traumatic times during their service, often related to the nature of the areas in which they served and the process of locating and relocating in communities. There are about 150,000 veterans in Northern Ireland, and the levels of post-traumatic stress disorder are higher than the average. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley made some good points about the need for more support for the mental health of veterans. I am sure that the Minister heard what he said and will acknowledge that there should be better support, not just in Northern Ireland but across the board.

The central point of the speech made by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley, however, was that section 75 of the 1998 Act militates against the equal application of the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland. I know that the Government do not agree, and believe that the two are reconcilable. We share that view: we
believe that it is possible for the covenant to be applied properly in Northern Ireland, and for that to be reconciled with the proper application of section 75.

The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) asked the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley whether the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission took the view that section 75 needed to be amended to be consistent with the proper application of the covenant. The answer of course is that they do not take that view. They viewed it perfectly possible for the two things to be applied, and I know that because I had a meeting only this afternoon with the chief executive of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland to discuss that very point. I further cite the view of a former Defence Minister, the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who has said that 93% of the armed forces covenant is being applied equitably in Northern Ireland.

I finally point to the view of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, because although we have not debated this issue in the House for four years, there was an excellent report by the Committee under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) that went into this issue in great detail. It assessed it and took a huge amount of evidence from all the bodies involved, and came to the conclusion that there are undoubtedly areas where specific policies applied in Great Britain are not implemented in Northern Ireland for the reasons I have mentioned—the legal, administrative, political and security differences—and other areas where there should be improvements, such as around access to IVF and mental health. I would be intrigued to know whether the Minister has anything to say about the changes to IVF cycles and the availability of them to former armed forces veterans, because the Government have previously promised to look at Northern Ireland versus elsewhere in that regard.

Conor McGinn: I have been robust in this House in my defence of the Good Friday agreement, and very occasionally my interpretation of it is slightly different from that of my hon. Friends from Northern Ireland, but on this matter I am very clear: not only is there a contradiction between the full implementation of the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland and the Good Friday agreement, but the logical outworking of the spirit of the Good Friday agreement is that veterans, their families and serving personnel are looked after.

Owen Smith: Of course, and equality is central to the Good Friday agreement, which is why it is so important that the armed forces covenant, which makes it clear that no armed forces personnel or their families should be in any way disadvantaged by virtue of their currently serving in, or having been in, the armed forces, must not in any way be out of keeping with the application of equalities legislation—section 75 in particular—which is absolutely critical to the underpinning of the Good Friday agreement. That is why I am so pleased to hear the Minister repeat the Government’s view that they do not think there is any need to amend section 75 because they believe the two things are entirely reconcilable.

Lady Hermon: Given the hon. Gentleman’s obvious support—and, I take it, his party’s support—for the military covenant throughout the United Kingdom and indeed for community covenants, I am curious about what is said when he meets representatives of Sinn Féin; I am quite sure he meets Sinn Féin MPs when they visit Portcullis House and Westminster, although they do not take their seats here. How often has the hon. Gentleman raised the military covenant and urged Sinn Féin to show more respect for the military covenant and the community covenant?

Owen Smith: I do, obviously, regularly meet all the political parties in Northern Ireland, including Sinn Féin, and I have raised the question of the military covenant and the perception that insufficient respect is paid to members of the armed forces in the way in which the community covenant in particular is applied, and I will continue to raise that in my conversations with Sinn Féin.

In conclusion, I shall refer the House to a few important remarks made in evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on this question. It had much greater opportunity to debate this issue at length. One of those important pieces of evidence came from the former Northern Ireland Executive Minister Edwin Poots MLA of the Democratic Unionist party. He said that he took the view that “no one is supposed to be treated better, and indeed, no one is supposed to be treated worse. Army personnel will not then be treated any worse than anybody else”, making it clear that the point about the covenant is to guarantee that there is no disadvantage to armed services personnel in Northern Ireland or elsewhere.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the shadow Northern Ireland Secretary for giving way. I appreciate his comments. May I quote from a letter dated 15 December 2016 from the most recent Health Minister in Northern Ireland, Michelle O’Neill, who is now the leader of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland? She wrote:

“The Armed Forces Covenant has been adopted by England, Scotland and Wales, to provide equal access to health care where it can be linked to military service, serving personnel, their families and those who leave the Military Forces. The Covenant has not been adopted here—meaning Northern Ireland—

“as health care arrangements are delivered on an equitable basis to all members of the community.”

That is a clear reference—I asked the Minister about this—to section 75. With the greatest of respect to the shadow Secretary of State, Sinn Féin’s view is that the armed forces covenant has not been adopted and that section 75 excludes its implementation.

Owen Smith: I can say with equal clarity to the right hon. Gentleman that the leader of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland is wrong in that regard, because the armed forces covenant has been adopted in Northern Ireland and should be implemented. The Opposition are clear about that.

Emma Little Pengelly: Will the shadow Secretary of State give way?

Owen Smith: I will give way one more time and then draw my remarks to a conclusion.

Emma Little Pengelly: I feel the need to say strongly that the armed forces covenant has not been formally adopted in Northern Ireland. I was a special adviser in the First Minister’s office, working with Executive colleagues,
and I sat down with and repeatedly asked Sinn Féin for the covenant to go on the Executive’s agenda and for it to be agreed. Sinn Féin refused time and again, not for any logical reason and not on the basis of equality, but due to its historical opposition to the British armed forces. I sat there and had those conversations. The armed forces covenant has not been formally adopted in Northern Ireland.

Owen Smith: The point is that this is clearly a politicised and, at some level, a political issue. Clearly, points are being scored on both sides of the divide in Northern Ireland. The key point I want to make is that the Government’s view, which we share, is that—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) rose—

Owen Smith: I am going to draw my remarks to a conclusion. The point is that 90% or so of the covenant is being applied properly in Northern Ireland, but there are some gaps. I have raised some with the Minister, and the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley has raised others. Mental health needs to be considered in particular.

In practical terms, the view expressed repeatedly to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee when it assessed the situation is that the reality is that no material disadvantage is being suffered by veterans in Northern Ireland. In support of that conclusion, Colonel Richard Gordon of SSAFA said to the Committee that he did not think that there any disadvantages to the armed forces community in Northern Ireland in respect of the covenant, and Brian Maguire of the Royal British Legion said:

“I cannot point to a single case, in all the cases we have dealt with in our time, where I can say for sure that the individual would have been better treated had they been living elsewhere in the United Kingdom.”

The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley mentioned what an important institution the Royal British Legion is in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, and I completely support him. Alongside SSAFA, it is one of the most important organisations providing support to veterans, and it does not support the conclusions that he drew in his remarks. The Royal British Legion supports the conclusions that I draw, and we need the covenant to be implemented properly. I therefore support the Government in not changing section 75, because it is entirely consistent with the application of the covenant to Northern Ireland.

5.53 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I welcome this debate and the speech of the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). It was hard to disagree with anything that he had to say, because he reminded us of the sacrifice of veterans across the UK, including in Northern Ireland. When we think about veterans, particularly on the mainland, we often tend to conjure up visions of either those brave warriors who defended us during the second world war, many of whom I am glad to say are still with us, or the younger men and women who served more recently in Afghanistan and Iraq. We sometimes tend to forget about the many other conflicts in which we have been involved, such as Korea, the Falklands, Bosnia and, of course, Northern Ireland. I am not an expert, but that must have been one of the most difficult experiences of all, because many of the reservists to whom the right hon. Gentleman referred were living with the threat of violence 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

There are people in this House who have served on frontlines around the world. I have never done so, but I imagine that being on active service must be incredibly stressful. Once that six-month tour of duty finishes, however, perhaps people can start to relax again, but that was not the case for so many people in Northern Ireland, particularly those who lived there. We have a particular debt of gratitude to all of them and to the right hon. Gentleman for raising the issue.

I feel very strongly about this issue. I am the Chairman of the Welsh Affairs Committee, which initiated an inquiry into the care of veterans in Wales and looked at the armed forces covenant. I believe that the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) was a member of the Committee at the time, so he will be aware of the report. It was a good report, because it showed that good practice was going on across the whole of the United Kingdom. There is no room to make any political points in that regard. We visited Scotland and met Keith Brown, a Scottish National party Member of the Scottish Parliament who is himself a former member of the Royal Marines. He spoke about the very good work that was being done in Scotland. Local authorities in Wales, led by all political parties, also support the armed forces covenant. We heard evidence from the then Labour Minister, and since then we have heard positive statements from the current Labour Minister, Mark Drakeford. A lot of good practice is going on across the United Kingdom.

I will briefly remind Members of some of our report’s conclusions. We thought that the one-stop shops for veterans in Scotland were an extremely good idea and that they could be considered in Northern Ireland and Wales. We heard evidence that those who had been moving around on service were sometimes disadvantaged when making an application for social housing. We heard about veterans experiencing problems getting paperwork transferred from the Ministry of Defence to their NHS. I say “their” NHS because there are, of course, four different ones across the United Kingdom, which can add to the problem. I hope that the Minister will look at that. People also have problems getting their children into school because they do not live in the catchment area. For those and many other reasons, it is very important that we implement all aspects of the armed forces covenant right across the United Kingdom.

I have a few, not complaints or criticisms, but thoughts. I do not want them to be seen as in any way critical of what the Government are doing, because overall I think they are doing very well. There were three things that worried me a little when we undertook that inquiry. The first is the definition of “veteran”. Under the current terminology, I could define myself as an armed forces veteran, having spent about 18 months in the Territorial Army in the late 1980s, during which time I am afraid I did not do anything of any great note, other than run around the Brecon Beacons on a Sunday evening and enjoy a cheap pint afterwards. Yes, it is a worthy enough thing to do, but at that time there was no suggestion that the TA would ever be called up to active service, as is now the case.
People who spend a few months in the Army, perhaps without even completing their basic training, can come out and call themselves veterans. I am not really comfortable with that—I do not think that it is absolutely right—although it would be rather difficult to pin down an exact definition, because there are people who have spent less than 12 months in the Army who may have been on active service, and they certainly should qualify. Perhaps we need to think about that.

Secondly—this came to me partly because of the definition issue—I am concerned about some of the charities currently working with armed forces veterans. I hasten to add that I do not mean those mentioned by hon. Members today, including the Royal British Legion, Combat Stress and SSAFA, which are excellent charities. I have certain concerns, however, about some that have been set up by people who are well-meaning but who do not have the relevant experience, and I am afraid that others have been set up by people who are trying to cash in on public support for the armed forces. I am currently involved in what could become a criminal prosecution, having challenged people who were in combat clothing—one of them had spent a few months in the Army and the other had not—who had links to an unpleasant, so-called far-right organisation, and who were collecting money in my hometown of Monmouth during the remembrance period. I am very concerned that some organisations that are setting themselves up as charitable concerns for armed forces veterans may have sinister connections to extremist political groups or may simply be trying to make money—or some combination of the two. That needs to be looked at, and I am not certain the Charity Commission and Cobseo are doing enough to crack down on it.

My other concern goes back to the definition of “veteran”. We rightly use that term to define anyone who has served in any branch of the armed forces, but other people, particularly in Northern Ireland, also ought to qualify. Obviously, I refer to members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, but I also refer to the forgotten service—those who have worked in the Prison Service. They also face and have faced violence and intimidation on a regular basis, and would be worthy of some of the care we are suggesting should go to members of the armed forces. I do not want to make any criticisms of any Government or any political party in this debate. I welcome the fact that the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley has secured it, and I hope that all the issues he has raised today will be properly addressed by the Government. I am confident that with today’s two Ministers, both of whom have very relevant experience of the armed forces, those concerns will be addressed.

6.1 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on his passionate, knowledgeable speech, which kicked off this afternoon’s debate. I declare an interest: my husband was an officer in Her Majesty’s Royal Navy. I have mentioned that many times before, but I probably have not mentioned that he is an Ulsterman.

Jim Shannon: It took an Ulsterman to win her heart.

Carol Monaghan: He was a very special Ulsterman.

The armed forces covenant is a statement of the moral obligation that exists between the nations of the UK, the Government and the armed forces. It was enshrined in law for the first time in 2011. Specifically, it outlines two core principles. The first is that current or former members of the armed forces, or their families, “should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services.”

The second is that:

“Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for...the injured and the bereaved.”

However, as the Armed Forces Act 2011 does not create legally enforceable rights for service personnel, across the UK it remains a statement of intent rather than a statement of action. It is a statement of intent to which members of the armed forces have no recourse, so we are letting service personnel down.

The right hon. Gentleman described the particular culture that prevents members of the armed forces and veterans in Northern Ireland from identifying themselves. I have experienced that personally when visiting Ulster with my husband and having to check under our car for devices, so I appreciate the situation we are talking about. The right hon. Gentleman described in some detail the fact that although many charities work with veterans in Northern Ireland, a lack of funding and a lack of transparency in some places with the veterans means there are serious issues. However, I believe this is part of a wider problem across the UK.

We welcome the progress that has been made with the new ministerial covenant and veterans board. In recent years, society has become far more aware and more understanding of the effects of military service on the health, mental and physical, of those who choose to serve, and on their relationships with their families and communities. However, it must be recognised that for veterans in Northern Ireland very particular circumstances apply, and for local councils to show reluctance to fully implement the armed forces covenant is simply letting these veterans down.

Veterans are an asset to society, and they deserve our thanks respect and support. In Scotland alone, every year approximately 1,800 men and women complete their military service and settle in our communities, many with their families. We have an ambition to make Scotland the destination of choice for service leavers and their families. For almost a decade, the Scottish Government’s Scottish veterans fund has made a real difference to the lives of the armed forces community in Scotland and has provided £1.1 million to a host of veterans and ex-service charities that offer advice, help and support. There is no doubt that that lead should be followed by other UK nations.

In Northern Ireland, there has been long-standing criticism of the lack of implementation of the armed forces covenant. We are of course all sensitive to the tensions that still exist in parts of Northern Ireland, particularly in respect of the Army, but that must not be used to avoid providing the service that personnel and veterans deserve and require. While I am talking about tensions, I wish to mention the outstanding work that has been done to break down barriers in respect of policing in Northern Ireland. The transition from the Royal Ulster Constabulary to the Police Service
of Northern Ireland has enabled the police in Northern Ireland to have a more inclusive outlook and to be widely accepted in every sector of society.

Members of the republican nationalist community serve with distinction in the RAF and the Royal Navy. For some, though, the Army is still viewed with suspicion. A recruitment drive aimed at alienated communities would undoubtedly improve diversity and community representation in the Army. With movement on this issue, I believe that cross-party support for personnel and veterans would increase—that is, of course, if power-sharing is ever restored.

Much of this debate goes beyond Northern Ireland. What makes this issue infuriating is the voicelessness of personnel and veterans. We believe that personnel should be properly represented in the military and among defence policy decision makers. An armed forces representative body that is on a statutory footing is the norm for many other countries, including Ireland, the Netherlands and Germany. Such a representative body would give voice to our armed forces and would be able to liaise directly with the Government and ensure that personnel and veterans throughout the UK are central to defence thinking. That would be a major step forward for personnel across the UK and would give a much stronger voice to veterans in Northern Ireland.

The UK Government should honour the armed forces covenant tenet of “no disadvantage”. The covenant commits the UK Government to removing, where possible, disadvantage experienced as a result of service, and that includes for serving personnel and veterans in Northern Ireland.

The UK Government should ensure that the military covenant is taken very seriously in Northern Ireland. He also mentioned how the Royal Netherlands and Germany. Such a representative body would give voice to our armed forces and would be able to liaise directly with the Government and ensure that personnel and veterans throughout the UK are central to defence thinking. That would be a major step forward for personnel across the UK and would give a much stronger voice to veterans in Northern Ireland.

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6.8 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on bringing this debate to the House. I agree with the Minister for the Armed Forces that the right hon. Gentleman’s speech was passionate and thoughtful, and I enjoyed sitting through it. He was correct to pay tribute to the reserve forces in Northern Ireland, and I pay tribute to those in the reserve forces throughout the United Kingdom. He also mentioned how the Royal British Legion in Northern Ireland raised more money for the Tommy’s poppy appeal than any other part of the UK. I took that as a challenge, because we Scots do not like to be beaten at many things, so perhaps in future the Royal British Legion in Scotland will engage in a bit of healthy competition with its Northern Ireland counterpart.

The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) mentioned the sparse attendance in the Chamber today. If I exclude myself, perhaps I can suggest that what is important is quality rather than quantity. At least every part of the United Kingdom has been represented in the debate, which is very positive.

The hon. Member for Mamphus (David T. C. Davies) spoke about his Welsh Affairs Committee’s visit to Scotland and the work it did there. He was right to highlight the good work that is being done in Scotland. I will focus my remarks on the good work that is done both Scotland-wide and particularly in Moray.

The armed forces covenant is taken very seriously in my constituency, which has had a significant military footprint for many decades. Like other speakers so far in this debate, I want to put it on record that our personnel and our veterans do outstanding service. We in this place should never tire of highlighting and praising what they have done and continue to do for their country.

I was delighted when, in October last year, Jo Lenihan was appointed armed forces covenant development officer serving the Moray and Highland military communities. Moray and Highland Councils are to be congratulated on joining forces to secure the post, which is funded by the Ministry of Defence’s covenant fund. As the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said, the covenant is to fulfil the Government’s promise to those serving and those who have served that they and their families are guaranteed to be treated fairly.

As Members will know, Moray has provided a home to the 39 Engineer Regiment at Kinloss barracks since 2012, when the Army took over the base from the RAF. Further east along the coast, RAF Lossiemouth is one of the UK’s two RAF quick reaction alert stations. It is the base for three Typhoon combat aircraft squadrons and an RAF regiment. From 2020, Lossiemouth will also be the host to the new P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft operated by two historic squadrons: 120 squadron was originally an anti-submarine unit in world war two, while the origins of 201 squadron date back to the first world war.

I will focus my remarks in today’s debate on the incredibly strong links between the armed forces community and the wider community in Moray, and that is what Jo Lenihan is working hard on to strengthen even further. [Interruption.] I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I was not sure whether you were confused by what I was saying.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware that this debate is about the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland. He is probably making the link between Moray and Northern Ireland, but I am sure that he will want to focus back on the subject of this debate.

Douglas Ross: Absolutely. I will take the hint, Madam Deputy Speaker. Whenever a referee looks confused at you, you know there is something wrong. I take that glare in the way that it was intended. What I hope to do in my short remarks is to explain how successful our covenant has been in Moray and why I understand that DUP Members want that success to be replicated in Northern Ireland.

In Moray, the links begin with the youngest members of our community—I hope that that can be replicated in Northern Ireland. Only a week ago, 39 Engineer Regiment hosted pupils from Forres Academy and Kinloss Primary School.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): rose—

Douglas Ross: I will give way, although I am worried.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Let me help the hon. Gentleman relate his speech to Ireland. The original derivation of the word “Elgin”, which is in his constituency, is actually “little Ireland”. So there you go—some help there.
Douglas Ross: I have been in this place for about nine months and that is the first helpful contribution that I have had from a Scottish National party Member. It may be another nine months or nine years before another one comes along, but it is great to have Elgin mentioned in this place.

We have also had 280 Moray schoolchildren attending a world war one centenary roadshow run by a national charity. As in other parts of the country, armed forces personnel also make huge contributions to many voluntary organisations. It is important that we remember that, when the original armed forces community covenant for Moray was signed in 2012, that was when we welcomed the Army to Kinloss barracks. As a sign of our commitment in Moray—again, it would happen in Northern Ireland—that was re-signed in October 2016. It is important to quote the words that were said by the then conveyor of Moray Council at that time, because it sums up what the armed forces covenant means in Moray, Scotland and across every part of the United Kingdom. At that signing ceremony, he said:

“This is an auspicious day for Moray. Senior representatives from all the public sectors in Moray and the military have come together to declare our continued support for the close ties and friendship between the armed forces at our two bases and the communities... The armed forces covenant is tangible proof of how our armed forces and everyone in Moray are all part of the same community, helping and supporting each other.”

That is what we want in every part of the United Kingdom.

The bonds that link our service communities in Moray with the wider area have always been strong, but the armed forces covenant has strengthened them even further. That is why I support the motion tabled by the DUP today. It is right that we recognise the valuable contribution to our armed forces of the men and women from Northern Ireland, including some of the best recruited reserve units in the UK. The final words of the motion are the most important: that this House “reaffirms its commitment to ensure that the Armed Forces Covenant”—which we enjoy in Moray and in Scotland—is fully implemented in Northern Ireland.”

6.14 pm

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross). His assessment was very interesting, and I was glad when he managed to get Northern Ireland into his speech, even though he had to get some help from the SNP. Everybody has their problems.

Our present day Government have a duty of care, and of course admiration, for each and every member of Her Majesty’s armed forces. Within their remit, it is vital that care and support is given to those who continue to live with the scars and the pains of bygone conflicts. In Northern Ireland, of course, we are all too aware of the pains of battle and what members of the armed forces faced during the years of struggle against the republican army. The military covenant is a real and genuine opportunity for the Government to show their gratitude to all who fought for the cause. Our nation has a moral obligation of support to our military members, and I am proud to say that right across the United Kingdom, people are continuing to fulfil that obligation.

In my constituency of Upper Bann, we had many losses over the years. From the 11th Battalion that was stationed in the constituency, we lost 16 soldiers. The Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment lost somewhere in the region of 205—the breakdown of that is 198 UDR and seven RIR—and 66 or 67 former members were killed, I think. In Northern Ireland 722 soldiers were killed by terrorists. Of course, on top of that we have members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, now the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and other forces. Some 6,116 were wounded. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) pointed out, some 300,000 soldiers served over that period in Northern Ireland.

The House can understand in just how much affection the people of Northern Ireland and the people on these Northern Ireland Benches hold our Crown forces today. Over the many years of troubles in Northern Ireland, the men and women of Ulster were never found wanting when it came to donning the uniform of the Crown forces. They knew duty had to be done, and they did it to defend the whole of the United Kingdom, right across the United Kingdom including, of course, Northern Ireland, with the troubles, but also even further afield, into Afghanistan and Iraq, where many were traumatised over the years.

Let me remind the House that there are Members of Parliament who disregard this covenant and have absolutely no desire to see its full implementation in Northern Ireland. Despite their objection, Sinn Féin cannot build the courage to stand before us in this Chamber and explain exactly why. That attitude fails to represent the voices of constituents who support the covenant and it fails to fulfil the overall obligation that we have to support our servicemen and women.

One key area of the covenant that I want to draw attention to is the importance of transition. I am sure that other hon. Members will touch on it; some have already done so. I have no doubt that this House recognises that the transition from service back into civilian life is a process that can often pose mental barriers for both the serviceman or woman and their family. Support for mental health care patients is a key issue that I have sought to address in my constituency of Upper Bann.

It never ceases to disturb me when I hear some of the stories of those who are struggling with mental illness. Across Northern Ireland, we face ever increasing numbers of mental health cases, and our healthcare professionals and support organisations are struggling to meet the demand, as we heard earlier. However, an ever greater concern is the many patients who think they can deal with their mental health problems and attempt to provide their own remedy of recovery. As we all know, this can often lead to dangerous, harrowing and tragic circumstances.

Many of our heroes will finish their service without physical injury or long-term damage, but in the months and years ahead, the scars and reality of battle can so often return with even greater effect. If fully implemented, the covenant would provide the training, education, healthcare referrals and appropriate career support for all those going through that transition period.

In closing, and on behalf of my constituents in Upper Bann, I re-emphasise my support for the full implementation of the armed forces covenant. I appeal to the Government to honour their commitment of care
to the servicemen and women who have given so much for this nation. It was mentioned that about 90% of the covenant is implemented. It has not been implemented in full in Northern Ireland as it has been in the rest of the United Kingdom. There is a point of principle here. Why are the servicemen and women who have sacrificed so much over the years in Northern Ireland being discriminated against, as British citizens, when every other part of the United Kingdom has the armed forces covenant? I hope and trust that in the not-too-distant future we will see it implemented in full.

6.21 pm

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): It is a great privilege to speak this afternoon on a motion brought forward by my party. I feel honoured to do so, but we must also remember that, as has already been stated, 763 members of the military lost their lives during Operation Banner in Northern Ireland. More than 300 members of the RUC also lost their lives, with 6,116 injured—that is, physical injuries, never mind the tens of thousands suffering from mental illness that has occurred because of what they went through, along with their families, who probably suffer equally.

As has been stated, the difficulty we have in Northern Ireland is that there are those who oppose the full implementation of the armed forces covenant. They are not just the enemies of Northern Ireland, but the enemies of Great Britain. They are the people who would rejoice in and commemorate the killings, 30 years ago this month, of two soldiers, Corporals David Howes and Derek Wood, by the IRA during a campaign to do with the hunger strikes. That was a marked point in the history of Northern Ireland. The same people who would condone those people do not seem to recognise that those who were killed in Gibraltar got—I will use the term—their just deserts. Those who were there as enemies of the state were taken out by those who deemed that they there to create havoc. I can tell you, those are the enemies of Ulster.

There are families who have not been recognised, nor had the opportunity to access services, not just in housing but in healthcare and everything else. Many areas need full implementation, and one of them relates to vacant property. Many men went away as reservists, serving their Queen and country in Afghanistan and Iraq, and still had to pay rates on the properties that they occupied. That is not the case in the rest of the United Kingdom. Those areas need to be brought in line.

I do not believe that we as a country go far enough even in recognising our military. When I am in the United States, I see with pride the way they treat their military and those who have served their country. They learned their lesson after the Vietnam war, when men came back and were treated as outcasts. We as a country need to learn from what has happened in the United States. People there have turned a corner; they recognise their military. They make it evident that they appreciate what the military have done for their country. Military personnel do not go to the back of the line; they come to the front.

It is vital that we do not put these people to the back of the line. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) said, those who are waiting on medical treatment and have to come across to the United Kingdom for treatment because of their injuries are not getting preferential treatment. I have a friend who lost both his legs in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, when he has to come over for treatment, he has to pay for his journey across. That needs to be looked at. As a country, we should be proud to go the second mile. We should not just state that we have a military covenant, but should go the second mile and give the military preferential treatment.

I disagree with what some people are saying, because section 75 of the Act implementing the Belfast agreement was to protect minorities. An amendment was made to it that includes the word “Travellers”—I stand to be corrected, but I believe that Travellers get a special mention in section 75. Lord Ashcroft did a review into the military in 2014, and I want to see the military and those who served within our security forces in Northern Ireland get the same recognition, with the same amendment made for them.

I see the House as widely united on this issue. It is great to see that we have brought a little bit of civility between the SNP and the Conservatives. Let us see if we can foster that and move it forward. I am probably not speaking to the converted, but we will try our best. It is great to see that our motion has the support of the House. Let us bring forward in Northern Ireland a full implementation of the armed forces covenant.

6.27 pm

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I rise to support the motion and am very grateful for the opportunity to do so. I welcome the fact that the Democratic Unionist party leader, the right hon. Arlene Foster, has been able to join us to observe the debate.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): She’s just leaving!

Emma Little Pengelly: I think I have literally chased her away, unfortunately.

Northern Ireland, as a number of Members across the House have outlined, has a long and proud record of service in our British armed forces. I wish to add my voice to all those in the Chamber who have paid tribute to that service and sacrifice by so many. Indeed, not only Northern Ireland but pre-partition Ireland had a very proud record of those who served in our British armed forces from across both communities.

In my maiden speech, I referred to one of those men: my own great-grandfather, James Sandford, who, coming from pre-partition Ireland, fought at not only the Somme but Messines and was injured in Ypres—shot in the chest—and survived. I also would like to refer to my grandfather, Joseph Little, who served during world war two and was one of the men evacuated off the beaches at Dunkirk.

I mention those details first because I am incredibly proud of my family history and my grandfather and great-grandfather and all those who served, and secondly because it took me until this stage in my life to take a look into the details of my ancestors’ service. It is incredibly important for not only my generation but younger generations to take time to look into their family histories and learn about the incredible service that these people put in to defend our democracy and the great United Kingdom over the years.
I understand that, as has already been mentioned, Northern Ireland has the highest number of soldiers per head of population in any part of the United Kingdom. We contribute disproportionately to the British armed forces, and I am incredibly proud of that. It is not just about the money raised in the poppy appeal and the incredible things that people do on the ground to raise that money, it is about that disproportionate contribution to the armed forces. We are very proud of that fact at all levels across Northern Ireland.

In our work on the armed forces covenant, we have estimated that the combination of the higher proportional contribution to the British armed forces with Operation Banner, the presence of security forces in Northern Ireland and recruitment to the UDR, including the part-time UDR, means that approximately a third of all people in Northern Ireland had served in some capacity, were an immediate family member of somebody who had served or were a grandparent or grandchild of somebody who had served. That is an incredible statistic when we consider that Northern Ireland is still a divided society, where the vast majority of the volunteers—those who go into the reserves or the armed forces—are from one side of the community, although I welcome the fact that that is changing and we are seeing interest from both sides.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: My hon. Friend provides me with an opportunity to recall a visit I made to Camp Bastion in Helmand province in Afghanistan—which was on operational deployment. I met soldiers from Cork, Limerick, Waterford and Dublin who were serving in our armed forces. I have to say that they had the Irish tricolour on display alongside the Ulster banner, demonstrating that people from both traditions serve in the UK armed forces, which we very much welcome.

Emma Little Pengelly: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention.

In my constituency of Belfast South, not only do we have many people who have served and continue to serve, but two units of the reserves are based there: on Sunnyside Street, there is a unit of the Army Medical Services—253 (North Irish) Medical Regiment—and on Hospital Road in Hydebank we have A Squadron of the Army Medical Services, 204 (North Irish) Field Hospital. I pay tribute to all the reserves who serve in the UK armed forces, and I am incredibly proud of that. It is not just about the money raised in the poppy appeal and the incredible things that people do on the ground to raise that money, it is about that disproportionate contribution to the armed forces. We are very proud of that fact at all levels across Northern Ireland.

In Northern Ireland, as in the NHS across the UK, services are under huge pressure. We all know why, and we have heard many of the reasons for that. Sadly, however, in Northern Ireland we have had decades of historical underfunding, particularly for mental health services. Yet along with that historical underfunding, we have particularly high and growing levels of mental health needs. Indeed, I understand that we have the highest levels of mental health challenges and needs across the UK.

We have examined the challenges facing Northern Ireland, and we know that some groups are proportionally more likely to face mental health challenges during their lifetime. They include people who experience poverty, particularly transgenerational poverty, and young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. In addition—this is particular to Northern Ireland—there are the victims of the troubles and those who serve in the armed forces. The point I am trying to put across is that mental health is a particular challenge for Northern Ireland because we have higher numbers in both those categories.

In relation to victims and survivors, some of the areas that suffered most acutely during the troubles were urban, built-up areas. The constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) had the highest number of shootings and murders during the troubles. A huge number of people were impacted by that. We know from the evidence that people who lived in close proximity to those things, or who were directly impacted by them because they or a family member was the victim of violence, tend to have significantly higher levels of mental illness. There is a need to do more for victims of the conflict, and we are looking at that.

Connected to that, many of the victims were people who served in the armed forces. As my colleagues have outlined, a significant percentage of the victims served in the likes of the part-time RUC, the RUC, the part-time UDR and the British armed forces. Although we try to deal with some of that in Northern Ireland through our victims and survivors provision, we need much higher levels of mental health provision because of our armed forces personnel.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the reference she made to my constituency, the legacy of the troubles and the service of so many veterans over the years. One reason why we have such high rates of mental health problems and suicide in Belfast, and north Belfast in particular, is the legacy of the troubles and the service of so many and what they have gone through. I am very grateful to her for highlighting that issue.

Emma Little Pengelly: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention.

The higher levels of victims and armed forces personnel in Northern Ireland put particular pressure on our services, in particular the NHS in Northern Ireland, which in turn has an even greater detrimental impact on soldiers who are just coming out of the armed forces now, who are trying to cope with a range of challenges from depression right through to post-traumatic stress disorder. A number of pieces of research have been commissioned that indicate that the incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder is considerably higher in Northern
Ireland and that the rate of those who suffer from it is much higher among those who served in the troubles or who have recently left the armed forces. That is incredibly challenging for our health service to deal with.

I also want to touch on education. I want to pick up on how the lack of the full implementation of the armed forces covenant has a detrimental impact in Northern Ireland. I was in the Northern Ireland Assembly before I came to this place, where I created and chaired the all-party group on tackling educational underachievement. One category we looked at that faced particular challenges was the children of serving armed forces personnel or those who had recently left the armed forces. That was due to a number of factors, such as the frequency of moves between different schools and young people coming into school as a late starter or late starter.

That is why I want to make reference to the comments of the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I care deeply about trying to make sure that those young people get full support, along with a number of other categories, such as young people on free school meals. It was absolutely clear from the research that those young people suffered disadvantage. In spite of that evidence, I could not get Sinn Féin to agree to implement the armed forces covenant and take action on these matters. The shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland referred to political point scoring. I do not say things to score political points, but I will always stand up and call out those who are in the wrong. It was absolutely wrong for Sinn Féin to refuse to implement the armed forces covenant at Executive level and to refuse to implement the community covenant at local council level where it has the power to veto. We need to be absolutely accurate about this, because that is exactly what is happening. Some Departments and agencies are clearly indicating that they are going ahead with implementation and are trying to support people in recognition of the objective needs of our armed forces personnel, but setting a policy of the formal adoption of the armed forces covenant would send a clear message across all levels of government.

As I indicated earlier, I had the privilege of working as a special adviser at the heart of government for almost 10 years. I sat on many cross-departmental and cross-agency boards, project boards and programme boards, looking at the development and implementation of policy. The biggest barrier to the effective implementation of policy and the effective dealing with identified problems was the lack of a clear policy on a top-down basis.

Nigel Dodds: My hon. Friend is making a very eloquent and powerful speech. Would it not be incumbent on the shadow Secretary of State to correct the record when he said that the armed forces covenant had been adopted in Northern Ireland? He did not respond to that point earlier and it would be good if it was put on the record.

Emma Little Pengelly: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I hope the shadow Secretary of State will take that opportunity, having accused anybody who has tried to stand up, and say very clearly, “I was there. I have had those conversations.” This is not about attacking Sinn Féin. This is not about political point scoring. This is about calling people out. It is a fact that we could not get it implemented at Executive level, so it was never formally adopted. Where individual Departments, individuals or agencies wanted to implement it, they did so, but there was no broad adopted policy to ensure that it happened. There was no accountability in relation to that.

Another point worth mentioning briefly relates to the community covenant. Again, this is a fact and I ask the shadow Secretary of State to take a look at it. Where there is a Sinn Féin-dominated council, Sinn Féin refuses to adopt the community covenant. That means there is a differential in terms of impact. There is a variation in the policy set to officials and others who implement policy.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady is addressing the House with considerable eloquence, but I express the cautious optimism that she is approaching her peroration.

Emma Little Pengelly: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am indeed.

In conclusion, despite what we have heard about the good work by third sector organisations, some councils and some Departments, clear policy needs to be set down at all levels. That has not happened and we want it to happen. We will continue to ask the Government to intervene to make sure that there is the full adoption of the armed forces covenant as soon as possible, so that no matter where our armed forces personnel live across the United Kingdom, they can receive the full protections and support they need.

6.43 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I have listened to the debate with great interest. I compliment the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on a most interesting opening speech.

I hope I will not try the patience of Ulster Members by talking about Northern Ireland, but, as I have told Members before, my wife comes from the city of Armagh, very near the border with the Republic. We were married in the darkest days of the troubles. Sadly, the thump of bombs and the crack of high velocity weapons is, even as a highlander, no strange sound. A number of friends of my wife’s family were killed in the troubles and both her brothers, as I have told this Chamber before, served in the UDR. The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) talked about shining a torch under the car to check for a bomb. That brought back a memory of asking one of my brothers-in-law what on earth he was doing as he did just that and he replied, “Looking for a bomb.” When sitting in the passenger seat beside a man like that and he turns the engine on—I actually put my fingers in my ears, because I was not sure whether I was about to meet my maker. The hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) talked about the strain and that is exactly what it was all about. It was tough going. These were brave guys and girls who did their bit for their country.

Just to lighten up slightly, let me share two anecdotes. First, I remember when as a foolishly young married man, I went exploring into south Armagh, which was bandit country, and inevitably, I got lost. Very near the County Monaghan border with the Republic, I remember...
noticing something lying beside the road—this wee lane, in fact—and I got out and examined it. It was a circular disc of aluminium with spikes coming out of it. I then realised that it was the bottom of what had obviously been a practice churn bomb that had been exploded in a remote part of County Armagh.

Again, perhaps for the amusement of the House, I will regale hon. Members with a tale about me and three other young people who were travelling from Armagh city to Omagh in County Tyrone on our way to a party. We were pulled up and stopped by a vehicle checkpoint, and an armed patrol of the UDR asked us to get out of the car. When I did, there were astonished looks for a start, and then they questioned me very closely about what on earth I thought I was. The trouble was that we were on our way to a fancy dress party in Omagh, and I was dressed—believe it or not—in tights and a large hessian sack as a haggis. That may or may not be in the annals of the deeds of the UDR.

The point I am making is simply that I knew the six counties of Northern Ireland at the height of the troubles. Today, I know Northern Ireland just as well, because my wife and I go there very frequently. What I see today is so different. I see the centre of Armagh city booming. I see Enniskillen—I am quite struck by this—in Fermanagh as a community that is really thriving. I can see all the shops doing well. I wish to goodness that some of our towns and villages as a community that is really thriving. I can see all the shops doing well. I wish to goodness that some of our towns and villages

Omagh, and I was dressed—believe it or not—in tights and a large hessian sack as a haggis. That may or may not be in the annals of the deeds of the UDR.

Of course, I give the armed forces absolute credit for what they did. It was a proud record. The point has been made about not forgetting the Northern Ireland Prison Service, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and all those whose lives were endangered during that time. My concluding point is that we have peace today, so in addition to the armed forces, we should recognise the contribution and the courage of those on both sides of the divide who brought about that peace process. Lastly, I was married two miles from the border with the Republic—I know all about hard and soft borders.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to do the winding-up speech in this debate. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on setting the scene so well and on reminding us of the 300,000 people who have served in uniform since 1969. He also reminded us—we need reminding sometimes—that those people from Northern Ireland have served in Iraq, Afghanistan and across the world, so it is not just in Northern Ireland. He also mentioned post-traumatic stress disorder and the fact that the very high levels are much due to the 30 years of the troubles. He spoke about the need for veterans’ mental health and psychological problems to be addressed. The Royal Irish Regiment aftercare service also needs to be extended. He referred to the opportunities—equal opportunities and better opportunities—in housing, for victims and in education, health and employment, and he asked the Minister about the Government’s report and the appointment of a champion for Northern Ireland. We look forward to his answer.

The Minister for the Armed Forces, the right hon. and gallant Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), is still a reservist and is still serving in uniform. He is still fit enough to do so—I am afraid I am not, by the way—and it is good to know that he is totally committed to the armed forces. I gently remind him of my question from November 2016, when I referred to the armed forces covenant. He replied that 93% of the covenant was in place in Northern Ireland, but we need to see 100%. He also referred to the LIBOR funding and the good projects that come from that.

The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith)—I am pleased that he is in his place—referred to the armed forces covenant and the support that he said he was giving for the military covenant. I remind him—I say this very gently and kindly to him—that we are not terribly happy about the comments that he made in our debate. I remind him that the former shadow Secretary of State certainly understood the issues relating to our commitment to the armed forces in Northern Ireland and the need for a full commitment. The next time he meets Sinn Féin, perhaps he will report back to the House and tell us exactly their thoughts on the need to have the armed forces covenant in place and fully part of what we are about. If he has time, he might also like to come and hear our point of view—I am not aware he has met the DUP parliamentary team in Westminster—and the quicker the better.

Owen Smith: I have, of course, met DUP Members, and I would be happy to do so again on any occasion the hon. Gentleman chooses. On the implementation issue, the reality is that the armed forces covenant does apply in Northern Ireland. As I said, there are some issues with implementation, but the semantic point that I think his colleagues were trying to make was that it was not fully endorsed by the Executive, for obvious reasons.

Jim Shannon: It is not about endorsement; it is about adoption and putting it 100% in place. That is what we want. I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that perhaps someday he will appreciate and understand what we are about.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I respect the shadow Secretary of State and look forward to meeting him to discuss this issue, but there is nothing semantic about a veteran in my constituency who cannot travel for vital treatment because the Department in Northern Ireland will not fund his travel. That is not a semantic point; it is reality.

Jim Shannon: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. Again, perhaps the shadow Secretary of State will grasp the cold reality at some stage.

Owen Smith: I am not here to discuss the Liberal Democrats’ general election campaign. I am here to discuss the military covenant. I also want to talk about the need for a full commitment. The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) found it took an Ulsterman to win his heart. We are pleased that that happened.

Carol Monaghan: May I point out to the hon. Gentleman that he was not a rich Ulsterman?

Jim Shannon: He was rich the day he married the hon. Lady. That is what riches are—not money—but that is by the by. We thank her for her comments.
She clearly outlined local councils’ reluctance in Northern Ireland to fully commit to and implement the military covenant. We are very aware of that, and she has quickly become aware of it as well. She referred to the transition of policing initiative and the principle that there be no disadvantage to service personnel.

The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) mentioned that councils in Scotland had brought in the military covenant—so the job’s done—and asked why the Northern Ireland councils could not support each other, as should be the case across all parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. My hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) referred to the scars. Sometimes we need to think for a minute sometimes about the scars, the pain and the hurt there has been. He expressed that extremely well in reminding us of the nation’s moral obligation towards those who sacrificed so much for all in the community. He also mentioned how Sinn Féin had disregarded this Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) mentioned how proud he was to stand up for veterans and how his own family had been part of that. He also reminded us of the commitment in the US of A to veterans and of those who have lost limbs and sustained life-changing injuries. We have been reminded today of what that means.

My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) mentioned how many of her family members had committed themselves in uniform to liberty and freedom and how incredibly proud she was of the armed forces. She also told us that one third of people in Northern Ireland had either served or had family members who had served. It is good to remember that sometimes. The Army units in her constituency remind us not only of the commitment of the reservists, but of that of the NHS whose personnel are allowed to serve in the reserve forces. We should never forget that.

The hon. Member for F耷ithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) had the good fortune to marry a girl from County Armagh.

Jamie Stone: This particular girl was not rich.

Jim Shannon: She was rich on the day she married the hon. Gentleman. That is the important thing.

I am very conscious of the timescale, Mr Speaker, and I am trying hard to stick to it. I must declare an interest, having served in the Ulster Defence Regiment for three years and in the Territorial Army for eleven and a half. I enjoyed every minute of my time as a part-time soldier.

My party has raised this issue before in the House, and it is of such grave importance to us that we will continue to raise it here until the contribution of our service personnel is recognised and respected in Northern Ireland in the same way as it is in the rest of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We in Northern Ireland should have the same arrangement as Wales, Scotland and England. No matter what has been said in Europe, we are an integral part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. My vote in this place is equal to that of every other Member, whether that Member is from Glasgow, Cardiff or London.

We are all equal here. We are all entitled to the same remuneration for our jobs. We are all entitled to the same support, including the support that is available to our families and our dependants. That is a given. Can you imagine the furore, Mr Speaker—I know it would annoy all of us here—if IT support, Library support and all the other support in the House were offered only to mainland MPs? Would we be mad? Of course we would. Can you imagine what would happen if we told the people of Brighton that the percentage of their housing benefit was different from the percentage paid in Bristol? There would be riots on the streets. We know all about riots in Northern Ireland, but I am sure that people in Bristol or Brighton would go mad.

Please will someone tell me why anyone thinks that it can be OK for there to be an armed forces covenant on the UK mainland and not in Northern Ireland? There is something seriously wrong with that. Is the sacrifice made by those in Northern Ireland not the same? Are their lives not worth as much? Are their families not deserving of support and care? Does the postcode lottery extend to serving soldiers and veterans from Northern Ireland? There is not one person here who could or should believe that, yet this is where we stand—still, after too many years of discussing the issue.

We are coming away from Europe, and it is hard. It is a slog, because we have the audacity to say that we wish to regain our sovereignty and make decisions for our people, as we are elected to do, instead of being financially taken advantage of by Europe and given little in return. Even in this, however, we do not have our own sovereignty. We are being held to ransom by members of a minority party who do not give the House the respect that it deserves by sitting in the Chamber. They do not take part in our debates, they do not take part in Committees, and they do not ask any questions. They do not take any role in this House. In return, instead of saying, “If you refuse to speak here, you cannot be heard”, we are being held to ransom, and they can do what they want.

I want to put on record my thanks to charities such as Beyond the Battlefield and the Royal British Legion. I think that if the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Pontypridd, visits my constituency, as other Members have, he will find that members of the Royal British Legion there are most perturbed about the armed forces covenant. I am sure that some day he will have an opportunity to talk to them face to face, and to listen to their point of view. Then there is SSAFA, in aid of which I organise a coffee morning every year. We have raised about £25,000 over the years for which I have been a Member of Parliament. A number of other charities are doing great work as well.

Education, health and roads in Northern Ireland are suffering because of the inability of Sinn Féin to maintain the political process in Northern Ireland. My constituency has a long and proud service history, with serving soldiers and veterans alike coming from Strangford. They are being disrespected and disregarded because of an abstentionist party. The members of that party cry for justice, but it is clear that their thirst is for vengeance against anyone who has worn a uniform or is perceived to be the enemy. They cry for openness and transparency while attempting to have convictions overturned, and
include the courts in their attempted rewriting of factual history. They cry and they cry and they cry, but I believe that in Northern Ireland we must move forward. We are in this Chamber. We are working for the people. We are using our voices for the people of Strangford and the people in Northern Ireland as a whole. I ask the Secretary of State to hear the people of Northern Ireland, to implement the covenant, and to do it with immediate effect. I ask him to take control of Northern Ireland, and to consider our sincere request for our people to be heard. I ask him not to sit still, but to make decisions for all of us.

I hope I am within the time limit that you wanted, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. It is the time limit that I got. We are most grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

6.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Talking of time limits, Mr Speaker, it is 6.59 pm now, and I am delighted to have until 8.4 pm to conclude this debate. I pay tribute to all who have spoken, and specifically to the DUP for calling this important motion and focusing on something that is important both to me personally and the Government. I declare an interest, in that I have served as a regular in Her Majesty’s armed forces—indeed, in Northern Ireland as well—and I serve as a reservist as a lieutenant colonel now.

The covenant is about our commitment, indeed our obligation, as a grateful nation to those who have served for the sacrifices they have made. We as a nation, a Government and a Parliament put them in a place of danger; we ask them to do things that arguably others in society do not do. Therefore, there is not only gratitude, but a determination to show our thanks by making sure that we look after them when they decide for that final time to slide the uniform back across to the quartermaster and move into civilian street.

It is important to say that the absolute majority serve well, transition well and adapt back into civilian society well; I make that point because this is a sensitive issue and people could get the impression from some of the debates we have that, were they to serve, they would perhaps come out damaged or frail, and that is not the case. I hope the whole House agrees that those who have served and are serving are better for it, and the nation is better for their service and what they can contribute once they have completed their service. Having said that, some, through no fault of their own, experience difficulties, and that is where the covenant comes in: to make sure we can provide that help, whether on employment, housing or debt. These are the aspects of the covenant that we need to make sure work in every part of the UK.

The covenant is not just about the obligations of the MOD. That is why the veterans board was created to bring together those who have responsibility in other areas of government across Whitehall, and to make sure they are held to account, so that when problems arise from the issues raised today, we know where to turn—to the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education or the devolved Administrations—to say, “What are you doing to improve what’s going on?”

I made a very interesting Remembrance Sunday visit to Belfast, and I thank all involved in that for helping me to better understand what is actually happening there, and to meet the various groups of veterans and supporters and hear what is happening today, which is very different from when I served myself. We also spent some time focusing on the practical application of the covenant, and we must recognise that its application is different in Northern Ireland, where it is a sensitive issue due to the unique political circumstances there.

However, much has changed since the last time we debated this subject four years ago. The Northern Ireland veterans support office is now established, up and running and working with the charitable sector, Cobseo and the public sector. We also have a veterans champion in each of the 11 authorities—again, working well—and we have seen significant funding in various aspects of support for the veterans community: for example, around half a million pounds to Combat Stress, which is specifically focused on its work in Northern Ireland, and £600,000 to Belfast Somme Nursing Home as well.

The covenant is also about employment; it is about making sure that there is that transition, a point made by Members across the Chamber today. We have the Defence Relationship Management organisation, which takes those who have chosen to put their hand up and say, “I am departing the armed forces,” through a journey, which begins up to a year and sometimes two years before the end of their service through to two years beyond their service, to make sure they are on their feet.

Again, I stress the case that about 90% of those who leave the armed forces—about 15,000 a year—are back in education or in employment within six months of leaving. But we must all recognise that the help is not always needed straight after they have left, but is sometimes needed many years after. The point that has been made again and again is that if someone is suffering from PTSD or another mental health issue, it can incubate and be there for a number of years, and sometimes the umbilical cord of support from the armed forces is stretched or almost broken. We have seen cases across the country of people coming forward to ask for help from medical services without even declaring that they are a veteran, despite that being something that a GP may need to be aware of. It is very important that we address that better, and we recognise the difficult circumstances in Northern Ireland.

Employment is critical for recognising the value of somebody who has served in the armed forces, with their leadership, commitment, teamwork, grit, tenacity and determination. Who would not want to employ somebody who has worked in the armed forces and has so much to offer? That is why I am pleased that the armed forces covenant is being signed by many big businesses, including in Northern Ireland, such as Caterpillar, Asda and Royal Mail. We are also working with 700 smaller businesses to ensure that there is engagement and a track for people when they leave the armed forces to see where their skills can be transferred.

In conclusion, the covenant is a journey. We created it, we signed it and we have made the commitment, but there is much more work to do, not just in Northern Ireland but across the country. Because of my service and the passion that the Minister for the Armed Forces and I have, we want to make this work. We have to make
it work. I thank the Democratic Unionist party for bringing this debate to the House today. The duty of debt that we owe is shared across the House, and this is the beginning of a journey. If I can make a promise to the DUP, I would be more than delighted to visit Northern Ireland again in the very near future to look in detail at some of the points made by DUP Members today, so that we can move things another notch further.

Question put and agreed to.

That this House recognises the valuable contribution made by men and women from Northern Ireland to our armed forces, including some of the best recruited Reserve Units in the UK and reaffirms its commitment to ensure that the Armed Forces Covenant is fully implemented in Northern Ireland.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 3 to 5 together.

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

PENSIONS

That the draft Automatic Enrolment (Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.

That the draft National Employment Savings Trust (Amendment) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

CRIMINAL LAW

That the draft Electronic Commerce Directive (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION (COMMITTEES)

Ordered.

That the School and Early Years Finance (England) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No.10) be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—(Rebecca Harris.)

HMRC Staff: Dudley

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

7.8 pm

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): I am grateful to have the opportunity to raise the House the threat to 250 jobs of hard-working and highly skilled civil servants employed by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs at the Waterfront offices in Dudley. I am also grateful for the brilliant work done by the local representative of the Public and Commercial Services Union, Tim Crumpton, and to constituents of mine who work at the centre for speaking to me about this matter. I congratulate them on their campaign to save the jobs and to keep the staff working in our community.

These are jobs that neither the staff themselves nor the wider community in Dudley can afford to lose, and that is why I am asking Ministers to look again at this decision. We want them to keep the Brierley Hill offices open and ensure that the highly skilled HMRC staff continue to work for the Government, serving the public. As Members will know, HMRC announced a radical office closure programme in November 2015, reducing the number of offices to just 13, spread across the UK.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He mentions the highly skilled employees. With the introduction of universal credit and the additional work of reviewing every former disability living allowance and current personal independence payment claim, does he agree that to dismiss highly trained staff, who are capable of working between Departments and easing the load, is folly and must be reconsidered?

Ian Austin: I completely agree. It is not party political knockabout to say that the introduction of universal credit is clearly not going according to plan. It has obviously hit some wrinkles along the road—that is a charitable way of putting it—and it is an odd decision to get rid of staff when we do not know how difficult it is going to be to properly introduce the new benefit.

The new regional centre for the west midlands will be in Birmingham. That led to the closure of the Walsall office in 2016, while the Worcester office is due to close next year and the Wolverhampton, Coventry and Solihull offices are due to close in 2020 or 2021.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I held a public meeting in Coventry at the end of January. There is a lot of concern because 300 jobs will go from the local tax office and people will either have to travel to Birmingham, or use a phone line, which is not always adequate for their needs. Does my hon. Friend agree that a halt should be called to this?

Ian Austin: My hon. Friend is completely right. Everybody knows how hard he fights for jobs in Coventry and that it cannot afford to lose those jobs, just like the Black country cannot afford to lose the ones in Dudley. The city council passed a motion unanimously, probably in no small part due to his campaigning.

It was announced that the Dudley office at the Waterfront and Merry Hill would be taken on by the Department for Work and Pensions, and that staff would transfer to
that Department; a small number of staff would have transferred to the Birmingham office. Staff at that office employed by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to work on tax credits were told in 2015 that they would be transferred to the DWP to work on the introduction and implementation of universal credit. As recently as last October, they were told that they would remain at the Waterfront offices to work on the new benefit. Instead, at the end of January it was announced that the Government had changed their mind, that their jobs were at risk and that the office would close. That came as a huge shock to the hard-working, highly skilled and loyal staff. On the same day, DWP announced up to 150 job vacancies at the Waterfront site. Inquiries have been made and they are fixed-term appointments, although local discussions have revealed that they could become permanent. The announcement had little detail and more was promised, we were told, in April 2018.

It was originally envisaged that the Birmingham regional centre would have a capacity of about 3,200 full-time equivalent staff, but when the site of the Birmingham office was announced in October, that figure was reduced to 2,600. No official reason has been given for that, but sources are very clear that it is based on the high costs of premises in Birmingham. The figure of 2,600 did not include the Merry Hill staff, because they were due to go to DWP.

We have discussed the situation in Coventry, where hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), have been campaigning. The same is true in Wolverhampton, where MPs also want their HMRC office to stay open. It has 300 staff and the local council also supports the campaign. Discussions have opened with Andy Street, the West Midlands Mayor, based on the combined authority agreement, which was signed by the then Chancellor with all of the West Midlands combined authority councils, and which uniquely states that there should be a regional Government hub in Birmingham and sub-regional hubs elsewhere in the region.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on the closure of the offices in my constituency, which will affect many of his constituents. Does he agree that the success of the surge and rapid response team at the Waterfront demonstrates exactly the kind of modern capabilities that would add so much to delivering universal credit, and that the redeployment should be reconsidered, whether with DWP or with other bodies, to make use of the existing staff and skills at the Waterfront?

Ian Austin: The hon. Gentleman is completely right. I will make that point later. These are highly skilled, highly trained staff, who are very experienced in dealing with complex benefits. No better group of people could be employed for the introduction of universal credit. That is the case we are making to Ministers tonight and I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman is here to do so, too. I very much hope that Ministers will listen to and consider the argument over the next few weeks.

That is a really important point, because for staff in Merry Hill the closure will present grave difficulties. A high proportion of them have caring responsibilities which would make the journey to Birmingham impossible; I have spoken to mothers in exactly that position.

A number of the staff came from offices that closed in the 1990s, and the journeys would make such a move impossible or impractical for them. The recent closure of the office in Walsall left more than half the staff without jobs, and the closure in Worcester is affecting nine out of 10 staff, who now face voluntary or compulsory redundancy; the majority of those staff have caring responsibilities.

HMRC insists that 90% of staff will have a job in the centres, despite the fact that all the closures so far have resulted in much higher job losses. The loss of these skilled and hard-working staff is very risky and it contradicts recommendations made by Committees of this House, which have called for a halt to the office closure process. Staff in Merry Hill believe that the DWP explanation that it has sufficient staff for universal credit to work properly flies in the face of all the current information we have about this complex new benefit’s introduction, as we heard a moment ago. Staff who work there are highly skilled; they have dealt with tax credits work since those were introduced, and they are helping with the changeover to UC from tax credits already. They were also stunned that the DWP vacancies were not even considered when the announcement was originally made.

Another point that I know will be of interest to the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) is that the office is in the middle of a recently announced enterprise zone, DY5, and the roles undertaken by HMRC staff completely fit into the Government’s vision for this enterprise zone. This brings me to my final point, which is about unemployment in Dudley.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. As the chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group, I wonder whether he could confirm that no economic impact assessment and no equality impact assessment has been carried out prior to these closures in Dudley?

Ian Austin: As far as I am aware, neither of those assessments has been carried out. That is another point the Minister should be considering this evening.

Unemployment in Dudley is already higher than the national average, and we cannot afford to lose another 250 jobs from the borough. It is important that civil service jobs are spread throughout the country, benefiting communities such as mine, instead of being centralised in London or major regional centres. The UK is already one of the most centralised countries in the world. As a result, investment and growth have been concentrated in the capital and stifled elsewhere. Extraordinarily, despite all the cuts, the proportion of the country’s civil servants located in London actually increased every year between 2010 and 2015. Even with deep cuts elsewhere in the country, there were 5,000 more civil servants in the capital in 2015 than there had been in 2013. Instead of closing offices in Black country communities such as the borough I represent, the Government should be moving civil servants and staff from non-departmental public bodies and quangos out of London, transferring jobs from the capital to the rest of the country, spreading wealth more fairly across the UK and contributing to the regeneration of communities in places such as Dudley. That would
improve policy making by getting central, regional and local government working more effectively together, bringing government closer to the people and ensuring that policy makers were better informed about what life is like in places that are often ignored by civil servants and politicians based in London. It would also save the Government money by getting staff out of expensive London property.

As I understand it, HMRC has announced that it will be moving 1,500 jobs out of London, so in the spirit of generosity for which we in the Black country are well known, may I tell the Minister that we would be very happy to provide a home for those 1,500 staff? I very much hope that he will consider moving those jobs out of London and to Dudley and the Black country.

Before I finish, I would like to ask some other specific questions. Staff in the office were told late last year that they would transfer to the DWP on 31 March 2022. Can the Minister confirm that it is still the plan that staff will remain in Dudley, working on tax credits, until that date? That would give time to see whether the DWP at Merry Hill can make some or all the fixed-term jobs permanent and offer them to staff there, and it would give time for staff to seek other work in the area and to be retrained. In addition, other DWP roles in local jobcentres would become available. That would not preclude staff who want to go to Birmingham from doing so, and it would offer other staff who work in Wolverhampton a stepping stone if their office does close, as many of them live in our area.

Will the Minister visit the offices with me and listen directly to the staff involved, or meet them here in London? Will he explain how this proposal reflects wider Government policy, given that Ministers recently designated the area as an enterprise zone? Finally, will he explain what assistance will be provided to staff who cannot transfer elsewhere or who do not get jobs elsewhere, to help them to obtain alternative employment if the proposed closure goes ahead?

The decision to close the Merry Hill office came as a huge shock to staff. Many of them will not be able to transfer and Dudley cannot afford to lose their jobs. It is my job to stand up for local people, which is why I secured this debate to demand that Ministers think again. These are hard-working and highly skilled public servants. They are very worried about their future and we need to secure their jobs. That is why we are here today, and I very much hope that Ministers will listen.

Let me explain the bigger picture. The original plan was for 4,000 HMRC staff throughout the country to be transferred to the DWP to work on universal credit. There are 600 HMRC staff in Preston, who were not part of those plans. They were needed at the new regional centres in Manchester or Liverpool. By February this year, the 4,000 staff throughout the country had reduced to 2,000, with staff in Liverpool, Merry Hill—to which my hon. Friend referred—St Helens and Dudley told that they would not be transferring. Of the remaining 2,000 staff, between 1,400 and 1,500 are in Preston at the Unicentre and the Guild Tower, which have a combined 20 floors, with the rest in Dundee. So far, 200 staff have transferred, and rumours are that the 100 who will transfer next month may be the last to go. This would equate to the loss of between 1,700 and 1,800 jobs in Preston.

Under HMRC’s “Building our future” plans, all the existing HMRC offices in Preston either will transfer to the DWP or are scheduled to close. Although Preston was among the original 40 sites shortlisted for consideration as a regional centre, under the current plans there will be no HMRC presence there at all after 2022. That could mean thousands of staff facing either the prospect of moving to work at HMRC’s designated regional centres in the north-west, in Manchester and Liverpool, which are unlikely to be within reasonable daily travel distances for staff from Preston, or the prospect of mass redundancies.

Will the Minister please look again at the plans? It is unacceptable that between 1,700 and 1,800 jobs might disappear from Preston. The scale and size of the new regional centres should be reviewed, because huge numbers of jobs in Preston are clearly at risk because of the plans that are dispensing with many staff who the Government know will not transfer to Manchester or Liverpool because of the distances involved.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I shall keep my comments very brief. As the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) has said, these proposals are particular and differ from many of the wider reorganisation proposals for HMRC. Some very specific plans were put in place—the workforce at HMRC in Merry Hill were consulted and told that staff would be transferred from the tax credits team to the Department for Work and Pensions to work on universal credit delivery. That was thought to be the position two months ago, but suddenly, out of the blue, the proposals changed. It came as a shock to HMRC staff based at the Waterfront and to their representatives—both those in the trade union movement and their elected representatives.

The hon. Gentleman set out some very good reasons why the Government should look again at how we can maintain and retain both the staff and the facilities at the Waterfront. The skills provided there are absolutely first class and would be a credit to any part of the civil service that could make use of them. As I mentioned earlier, the surge and rapid response team that has been operating out of the Waterfront—originally from HMRC and the passport service—has shown the adaptability of the teams that are based there. There is no doubt that the tax credit team could similarly transfer and provide a fantastic service, whether it is in conjunction with DWP, other parts of HMRC or Her Majesty’s Treasury.
The Waterfront is a growth area. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the DY5 enterprise zone that many of us worked so hard to secure. On top of that, we have the new tram links connecting to that enterprise zone, which—I almost said coincidentally, but it is almost tragically—is due to open at almost exactly the time when these jobs are scheduled to be taken away from the Waterfront.

I urge my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to look again at both the content of these proposals and the timetable for them, to see whether the Government are doing absolutely everything they can to find the right way to make full use of the fantastic talent that we have at HMRC at the Waterfront, to give employees the certainty that they need, to retain the skills and experience that we need in the civil service, and to set an awful lot of minds at rest in my constituency and that of the hon. Member for Dudley North.

7.28 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) on securing this important debate. I know that there are matters of particular concern to him, as they are to the hon. Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) and my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood), who have also made contributions this evening. HMRC’s location strategy was the subject of a Backbench Business debate held in November last year, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to return to this important matter.

As the hon. Member for Dudley North pointed out, in November 2015 HMRC announced its location strategy as a crucial element of its work to create a modern, world-class tax authority—a key part of our long-term economic plan for national prosperity. Since 2010 we have made substantial investments, enabling HMRC to do more to tackle evasion, drive down avoidance and improve compliance.

HMRC is transforming into a leaner, more highly skilled operation, offering modern digital services. It is moving away from outdated systems of manual processing to become more flexible and technologically driven—changing the way it works and using today’s technology and IT to improve the services it delivers for its customers. These investments in technology mean that HMRC can tackle fraud, evasion and avoidance more effectively and that customer services have improved, with far lower wait times on helplines and new ways to get support, such as webchats.

Changes to HMRC’s office estate are an important part of this transformation process, moving it from a large, widely dispersed estate of offices across the UK, varying in size, to a considered network of significant, modern regional hubs. In November 2015, HMRC announced that over the following 10 years it would bring its employees together in 13 regional offices, all in locations where it already has a significant presence, as it does in Birmingham. The co-location of teams across HMRC will lead to increased collaboration and flexibility, allowing it to provide more effective and efficient services to the taxpayer, and it has put support in place to help its workforce through the changes.

In Birmingham, the regional centre will be situated in the heart of the city at 3 Arena Central. It will be home to 3,600 civil servants, with 2,650 HMRC staff moving in from 13 offices around the west midlands region to undertake a wide range of key tax professional and operational delivery roles.

The first of HMRC’s regional centres opened in Croydon in July 2017 and construction is under way at the Birmingham site, along with further sites in Bristol, Cardiff, Belfast and Leeds. All those offices will be modern, environmentally friendly and located in the heart of the community. Most of them will be shared with other Government Departments, and all have been sized for the future needs of HMRC and the taxpayer.

In addition to the 13 regional centres, HMRC will keep seven transitional sites open across the UK for several years, where it will help retain key skills during the transition period, as well as five specialist sites for work that cannot be done elsewhere. For example, HMRC will retain Telford as a site for some of its specialist digital teams. By phasing the moves into its regional centres over a number of years and keeping sites open during the transition, HMRC will ensure that disruption to its business operations is minimised. The Birmingham regional centre will open in late 2020.

The overall programme to move to regional centres will deliver savings to the taxpayer of around £300 million up to 2025 and then annual cash savings of £74 million in 2025-26, rising to more than £90 million by 2028. It will also avoid costs of £75 million a year from 2021, when the current private finance initiative contact with Mapeley comes to an end.

It is important to stress that this is not just about cost savings and bricks and mortar. HMRC’s new office structure will allow people to develop more fulfilling careers. There will be a far wider variety of jobs and different career paths to senior roles, as a wider range of work will be based on single sites. These modern buildings will unquestionably deliver a better working environment and experience for HMRC’s workforce. Crucially, their city centre locations will also increase HMRC’s attractiveness as an employer, enabling it to recruit and retain the next generation of skilled professionals. That is particularly important given that a substantial proportion of its long-serving workforce are approaching retirement age.

HMRC is clear that it wants to do all it can to keep its people’s skills, knowledge and experience, and it has a policy of minimising any redundancies. The vast majority of HMRC employees are within reasonable daily travel of a regional centre, specialist site or transitional site, and that is deliberate: decisions on where to locate the regional centres were based on modelling of where existing staff are based. HMRC estimates that 90% of its workforce will be able to move to one of its regional centres or complete their career in their current office. For those currently based at the Waterfront offices, the travel time from Dudley to Birmingham city centre is between 35 and 55 minutes by car or train.

That said, HMRC recognises that individual employees have distinct personal circumstances, and not everyone will feel able to move to a regional centre, even where they might be reasonably close by. So it has put structured support in place—this is a point that the hon. Member for Dudley North asked about—to help those who can move and those who cannot. One year ahead of any move, everyone affected has the opportunity to discuss their personal circumstances with their manager and talk through any particular needs to be taken into
account when decisions are made or any help they need to make the move—for instance, help with additional travel costs for up to the first five years. It is a tried and tested process, with more than 10,000 such conversations held in HMRC over the last two years. There is also a range of support for those unable to make the move to a regional centre. HMRC runs a programme of training, workshops, webinars and coaching, which includes advice on CV writing and identifying transferrable skills. Since starting in the autumn, it has been offered to around 800 employees, and HMRC will continue to provide such support.

Let me turn to some specific questions that the hon. Member for Dudley North posed. An equality assessment was conducted prior to the location’s announcement in 2015, with a high-level summary published to staff at that time. HMRC continues to review those, and the issues in the west midlands are of course considered with the active input of representatives from the Brierley Hill office and the local Public and Commercial Services Union.

The hon. Gentleman also asked me an important question about the date to which staff not being transferred on the universal credit/DWP basis might expect to stay in place. Currently, HMRC expects there to be ongoing tax credits work in Brierley Hill until March 2021. At that point, the tax credits caseload is expected to have fully moved across to universal credit, so the tax credits work currently undertaken in Merry Hill will come to an end. However, HMRC intends gradually to redeploy the skilled and experienced staff there to other work as the tax credits caseload decreases. HMRC will work with those staff to ensure that there is every opportunity to make a successful move into reallocated employment.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether I would be happy to meet him and some of the staff with whom he has been liaising. I would be more than happy to do that. Perhaps doing so in Westminster would be most appropriate, as the hon. Member for Preston and my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South might wish to join him for those discussions—I would certainly be open to that.

Finally, the hon. Member for Dudley North asked about the support provided for those who might not, in the event, be able to make the move from Merry Hill to the new centre in the centre of Birmingham. As I have said, all staff will have a one-to-one discussion with their manager around a year in advance of any office move that affects them, to discuss their personal circumstances, establish whether they are within reasonable daily travel of the new office and discuss what support might be needed to enable them to move. For those who can move, there will be financial support towards the additional cost of their journey time for up to five years. HMRC is supporting those who cannot move by seeking redeployment opportunities for them in other Departments.

**Question put and agreed to.**

7.38 pm

*House adjourned.*
Deferred Divisions

POLITICAL PARTIES, NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Transparency of Donations and Loans etc. (Northern Ireland Political Parties) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 23 November 2017, be approved.

The House divided:

Division No. 126]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Andrew
Afriyie, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Alistair
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Sir David
Berkeley, Sir Lilian
Berkeley, Sir Lilian
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Bradley, rh Karen
Breer, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookes, Sir Paul
Brookes, Sir Paul
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cairns, rh Alun
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cawthra, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chisholm, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleaver, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Theresa
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
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Downen, Oliver
Dowdell, Pier
Drax, Richard
Dudbridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, Sir Timothy
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evanneth, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Ferry, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fyshe, Rh March
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hall, rh Robert
Hall, rh Robert
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, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddlestone, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alistair
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrew
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Graham
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Keeegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Little, Mrs Pegeenly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moor, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morrison, David
Morrison, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neil, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Oford, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mark
Penrose, John
Perry, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sanda, rh John
Sandbach, Antoinette
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rhys
Spelman, rh Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
7 March 2018

Deferred Divisions

Stewart, Bob
Stewart, lain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, 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, rh 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, rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, rh Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
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
Burston, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Caddbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Coffey, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy

Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Harty, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hussain, Imran
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Keeble, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kilien, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, rh Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmoor, Mr Khalid
Mahmoor, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh Helen
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor

McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Meears, 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
Osamar, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pidcock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rooda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
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**AYSES**

- Adams, Nigel
- Afolami, Bim
- Afriyie, Adam
- Aldous, Peter
- Allan, Lucy
- Allen, Heidi
- Amess, Sir David
- Andrew, Stuart
- Ar Gir, 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
- Bowe, Andrew
- Bradley, Ben
- Bradley, rh Karen
- Brady, Sir Graham
- Brake, rh Tom
- Breer, 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
- Cartidge, James
- Cash, Sir William
- Caufield, Maria
- Chalk, Alex
- Chishti, Rehman
- Chope, Sir Christopher
- Church, Jo
- Clarke, Colin
- Clarke, rh Greg
- Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
- Clarke, Mr Simon
- Cleverley, James
- Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
- Coffey, Dr Therese
- 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
- Docherty, Leo
- Dodds, rh Nigel
- Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
- Donelan, Michelle
- Double, Steve
- Dowden, Oliver
- Doyle-Price, Jackie
- Drax, Richard
- Duddridge, James
- Duguid, David
- Duncan, Sir Alan
- Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
- Dunne, Mr Philip
- Ellis, Michael
- Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
- Elphicke, Charlie
- Eustice, George
- Evenett, rh David
- Fabricant, Michael
- Fallon, rh Sir Michael
- Fernandes, Suella
- Field, rh Mark
- Ford, Vicky
- Foster, Kevin
- Fox, rh Dr Liam
- Fraser, Lucy
- Freemantle, George

**NOES**

- Freer, Mike
- Fysh, rh Mr Marcus
- Gale, Sir Roger
- Garnier, Mark
- Gauke, rh Mr David
- Ghani, Mr Nusrat
- Gibb, rh Nick
- Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
- Girvan, Paul
- Glen, John
- Goldsmith, Zac
- Goodwill, Mr Robert
- Graham, Luke
- Grant, rh Richard
- Grant, Bill
- Grant, Mrs Helen
- Grayling, rh Chris
- Green, Chris
- Green, rh Damian
- Greening, rh Justine
- Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
- Griffiths, Andrew
- Gyimah, Mr Sam
- Hair, Kirstene
- Hallon, rh Robert
- Hall, Luke
- Hammond, rh Mr Philip
- Hammond, Stephen
- Hancock, rh Matt
- Hands, rh Greg
- Harper, rh Mr Mark
- Harrington, Richard
- Harris, Rebecca
- Harrison, Trudy
- Hart, Simon
- Hayes, Mr John
- Heald, rh Sir Oliver
- Heappey, James
- Heathon-Harris, Chris
- Heathon-Jones, Peter
- Henderson, Gordon
- Herbert, rh Nick
- Hinds, rh Damian
- Hoare, Simon
- Hobhouse, Wera
- Hollingbery, George
- Hollinrake, Kevin
- Hollobone, Mr Philip
- Holloway, Adam
- Howell, John
- Huddleston, Nigel
- Hughes, Eddie
- Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
- Hurd, rh Mr Nick
- Jack, Mr Alister
- James, Margot
- Javid, rh Sajid
- Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
- Jenkin, Mr Bernard
- Jenkyns, Andrea
- Jenrick, 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 Mr Greg
- Knight, Julian
- Kwarteng, Kwasi
- Lamont, John
- Lancaster, rh Mark
- Leadsom, rh Andrea
- Lee, Dr Philip
- Lefroy, Jeremy
- Leigh, Sir Edward
- Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
- Lewer, Andrew
- Lewis, rh Brandon
- Lidderdale-Grainger, Mr Ian
- Liddington, rh Mr David
- Little Pengelly, Emma
- Lloyd, Stephen
- Lopez, Julia
- Lopresti, Jack
- Lord, Mr Jonathan
- Loughton, Tim
- Mackinlay, Craig
- Maclean, Rachel
- Main, Mrs Anne
- Mak, Alan
- Malthouse, Kit
- Mann, Scott
- Masterton, Paul
- May, rh Mrs Theresa
- Maynard, Paul
- McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
- McVey, rh Ms Esther
- Menzies, Mark
- Merriman, Huw
- Metcalfe, Stephen
- Miller, rh Mrs Maria
- Milling, Amanda
- Mills, Nigel
- Milton, rh Anne
- Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
- Moore, Damien
- Moran, Layla
- Mordaunt, rh Penny
- Morgan, rh Nicky
- Morris, Anne Marie
- Morris, David
- Morris, James
- Morton, Wendy
- Mundell, rh David
- Murray, Mrs Sheryl
- Murrison, Dr Andrew
-Neill, Robert
- Newton, Sarah
- Nokes, rh Caroline
- Norman, Jesse
- O’Brien, Neil
- Offord, Dr Matthew
- Opperman, Guy
- Paisley, Ian
- Parish, Neil
- Patel, rh Priti
- Pawsley, Mark
- Penning, rh Sir Mike
- Penrose, John
- Percy, Andrew
- Perry, rh Claire
- Philip, Chris
- Pincher, Christopher
- Poulter, Dr Dan
- Pow, Rebecca
- Preatis, Victoria
- Pritsker, Mark
- Pritchard, Mark
Deferred Divisions

Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey  
Rodda, Matt  
Rowley, Danielle  
Ruane, Chris  
Ryan, rh Joan  
Saville Roberts, Liz  
Shah, Naz  
Sheerman, Mr Barry  
Sheppard, Tommy  
Sherriff, Paula  
Shuker, Mr Gavin  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Slaughter, Andy

Smith, Angela  
Smith, Cat  
Smith, Eleanor  
Smith, Jeff  
Smith, Laura  
Smith, Nick  
Smith, Owen  
Smith, Karin  
Snel, Gareth  
Sobel, Alex  
Stephens, Chris  
Stevens, Jo  
Streeting, Wes  
Stringer, Graham  
Sweeney, Mr Paul

Tami, Mark  
Thewliss, Alison  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thomas-Symonds, Nick  
Thornberry, rh Emily  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Turley, Anna  
Twigg, Derek  
Twist, Liz  
Umunna, Chuka  
Vaz, Valerie  
Walker, Thelma

Watson, Tom  
West, Catherine  
Western, Matt  
Whitfield, Martin  
Whitford, Dr Philippa  
Williams, Dr Paul  
Williamson, Chris  
Wishart, Pete  
Woodcock, John  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.
George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that this is an issue on which the Home Office leads. We have regular discussions with Home Office colleagues on these matters and we feed in the feedback that we get from industry on this matter. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear in his speech to the National Farmers Union, we are looking closely at the idea of a seasonal agricultural workers scheme, so that we can have the labour that we need after we leave the European Union.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Most of the food produced and processed in my Cleethorpes constituency is reliant on good supplies of fish. Can the Minister give an absolute assurance that the fishing industry will not be sold out in these negotiations as it was in the 1970s?

George Eustice: We have consistently been clear that when we leave the European Union, we leave the common fisheries policy. Under international law—the UN convention on the law of the sea—we then become an independent coastal state, and we will manage the fisheries resources in our exclusive economic zone and manage access to our own waters.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): How will the Minister ensure that farm subsidies after Brexit will remain targeted at food production?

George Eustice: We have been clear that we will maintain the total spending that we have on agriculture and the farmed environment until 2022. We have also been clear—our paper sets this out—that there will be a transitional period as we move from an incoherent system of area payments, which we have now, to one that is focused on the delivery of public goods. We recognise that there will need to be a gradual transition from the old system to the new.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The EU’s common agricultural policy has been a disaster for the British dairy industry, because it has been designed in the interests of French farmers, not British farmers. How can we put that right after Brexit?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The common agricultural policy has all sorts of inconsistencies. Having a one-size-fits-all agricultural policy for the whole European Union makes no sense at all, and as we leave the European Union and take back control of these matters, we will have the freedom to design an agricultural policy that works for our own farmers.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): May I say first how relieved I am that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) made it here today to ask this important question?

When the Secretary of State looks at how best to support food producers, he should be aware that the figures of the Department for Environment, Food and
Rural Affairs show that 64% of farmers earn less than £10,000 a year and that eight supermarkets control almost 95% of the food retail market. Recent figures also show that farmers receive less than 10% of the value of their produce that is sold in supermarkets. Can the Secretary of State—or the Minister today—tell me, please, what he is doing to tackle this clearly inequitable and unsustainable situation?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady makes an important point. If we want to move to a position in which farmers are no longer dependent on subsidies, it is important that we support farmers to come together collaboratively, to strengthen their position in the supply chain and ensure that they get a fairer price for the food that they produce. We recently outlined a series of proposals for a statutory code on dairy and a statutory approach to carcase classification for sheep, together with a range of other options.

Groceries Code Adjudicator

2. Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on extending the role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I have had regular dialogue with Ministers in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy regarding the role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator, and we recently had a call for evidence on the matter. In our response on 16 February to that call for evidence, we set out a range of measures to improve fairness in the supply chain and strengthen the position of farmers and small producers.

Stephen Timms: I am the unpaid chair of the trustees of the Fairtrade organisation Traidcraft. There were high hopes across the Chamber of a stronger Groceries Code Adjudicator to protect suppliers from unfair practices, such as last-minute cancellations of orders and unexplained deductions from invoices. Ministers started consulting, I think, 18 months ago on possible changes. The farming Command Paper last month promised fairness in the supply chain, but hopes were dashed with the announcement last month that there would be no change to the adjudicator’s remit. Why are Ministers failing to take action?

George Eustice: I do not accept that there was no change. As I said a little earlier, we have announced a package of measures. It includes a £10 million collaboration fund to help farmers and small producers to come together, compulsory milk contracts legislation to protect dairy farmers, compulsory sheep carcase classification, a commitment to making supply chain data easier to access to improve transparency and market integrity and a commitment to reviewing whether more grocery retailers should come under the GCA’s remit.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I hear what the Minister says, but given that the vast majority of producers and consumers are very keen for the Groceries Code Adjudicator to be strengthened, why will he not do so? The Opposition are very happy to help if he says that he is prepared to strengthen the code.

George Eustice: When we looked at the evidence, we found that a lot of it concerned particularly vulnerable sectors, such as dairy and some of the other livestock sectors, which often end up becoming price takers because they do not have sufficient strength to deal with large processors. It was less an issue of the supermarkets and more an issue of the processors. We have decided that a better way to take this forward is to introduce other statutory codes that target the problem, rather than trying to change the GCA’s remit.

Bottle Deposit Return Scheme

4. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): If he will implement a deposit return scheme for bottles.

6. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): If he will implement a deposit return scheme for bottles.

13. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): If he will implement a deposit return scheme for bottles.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Last autumn, an independent working group was set up, as part of the litter strategy for England, to hold a call for evidence on measures to reduce littering of drinks containers and promote recycling. That included seeking evidence on the costs, benefits and impacts of deposit return schemes. I have recently received the report, and I am considering the recommendations.

Jeff Smith: We know that in this country, 15 million plastic bottles a day are not recycled. We also know that a deposit return scheme can increase recycling rates, and I hope that the Government will introduce such a scheme after this report. May I urge them to introduce a scheme that applies to all drinks containers, of all sizes and from all sale locations, rather than a scheme that applies only to on-the-go containers from kiosks and vending machines?

Dr Coffey: Part of the evidence that was submitted reflects the fact that councils offer a comprehensive recycling service at the kerbside. I am delighted to say that Rotherham has finally agreed to start collecting plastic bottles. We need to consider the approach carefully. I think that there is an appetite for a DRS, but the schemes that we have seen in other parts of Europe are very different, and we need a scheme that works for this country and achieves the outcomes that we all seek.

Chi Onwurah: Like many colleagues, I have pledged to “pass on plastic”. For too many of my constituents, doing so is impossible because their streets and their lives are inundated with a flood of plastic bottles, bags, food trays and crisp packets, turning their environment into a dumping ground. Will the Minister take action urgently and stop denying local authorities such as Newcastle City Council the powers and the resources to tackle the problem? Frankly, right now on the environment, this Government are rubbish.

Dr Coffey: I think that question was a complete waste of space. The hon. Lady refers to powers. The Government have given councils the powers that they have been asking for to tackle littering and waste crime, so I think...
she is being rather ungenerous about the progress that is being made. Plastic has a role in safe packaging, but it has become endemic. That is why we are considering it carefully in the resources and waste strategy, which we intend to publish later this year.

Liz Twist: We have litter-picking groups across my constituency, and we see loads of areas where plastic bottles and glass bottles are dumped. Will the Minister commit now to introducing a deposit return scheme for plastic and all other containers, so that we can avoid this plague of plastic?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Let us be clear: the people who drop litter are litter louts. I reiterate my phrase, “Don’t be a tosser!” because it does not help society to drop litter anywhere and everywhere. Let us get real about how we need to tackle that. I commend the work that Keep Britain Tidy does in encouraging litter collections. However, the hon. Lady is right: we need to sort this issue out in the first place. That is why DRS is being considered very carefully as part of our resources waste strategy.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): On International Women’s Day, I would like to be a bit more consensual and ask the Minister to applaud the campaign by our female colleagues to give up plastics for Lent and the Church of England’s initiative on practical suggestions for something that we can do on every one of the 40 days. Has the Minister given up something plastic for Lent? Will she join us in writing to manufacturers for whom there is no alternative to plastic to encourage them to find a sustainable solution?

Mr Speaker: Let us hear the details.

Dr Coffey: Of course a Church Commissioner would call upon God and the Church of England to inspire us. I am also one of the people who has taken the pledge to try to give up something plastic for Lent. I pledged to carry a water bottle around in my handbag—I am not going to produce a prop, Mr Speaker—and I have had to sacrifice my Marmite in the Tea Room because it is only sold in plastic sachets. We are all looking forward to the proposals from Parliament, because this does matter. The campaigns on passing on plastic and giving up plastic for Lent are partly about behavioural change among consumers. I believe that companies are starting to respond and we are starting to see changes, but the more consumers demand this, the quicker action will happen in the marketplace. I assure the House that this Government will take action.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): A deposit return scheme is not just about raising recycling rates; it is also about educating and raising awareness among the public about the need to be responsible. In that vein, will the Minister join me in praising the many towns across Cornwall—Newquay, Falmouth, Penzance, Bude, and many others—that have declared their aims to become single-use plastic free? Does she agree that Cornwall is leading the way in raising awareness of this issue?

Dr Coffey: As ever, my hon. Friend is passionate about this cause; I know that he has been championing it. Of course I applaud those many towns and communities in Cornwall for wanting to do the right thing.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware that in Ashbourne over the past four days, tens of thousands of plastic bottles of water have been handed out by Severn Trent because of its failure to reconnect the water supply? At the moment, the compensation level is £30 a day, which is woefully inadequate. Will she look at the specific case surrounding Ashbourne?

Dr Coffey: As I announced to the House the other day, I have asked Ofwat to undertake a review. I have also encouraged water companies to improve the compensation that they could discretionally offer. I expect that Severn Trent is already responding to the call from my right hon. Friend.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The plastic that we see on our beaches and at our roadsides is what brings this to people’s attention, but in fact the plastic particles that we do not see should be of the greatest concern. A recent BBC report found that in 1 litre of melted Arctic sea ice there were 234 plastic particles. Surely, that should be why we treat this urgently. If the Minister is consulting on this, it should be about how we do it, not if.

Dr Coffey: This Government have taken strong action on banning microplastics from certain products. We are still waiting for the other nations, but they have committed to making sure that that happens by June as well. On the right hon. Gentleman’s point about the Arctic ice, this is indeed a global matter. That is why we work hard with other nations through different forums, whether the OSPAR Commission on the convention for the protection of the marine environment of the north-east Atlantic, the G7, other agencies such as the United Nations, or of course our Commonwealth countries, which will be visiting the UK next month for the summit.

Leaving the EU: Policy Development

5. Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): If he will develop agricultural policy and environmental standards for the period after the UK leaves the EU in parallel with trade negotiations with the EU. [904252]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Our approach to future environment policy was set out in our recently published 25-year environment plan; our approach to future agriculture policy was published in our consultation last week; and our approach to trade negotiations with the EU was outlined in a speech by the Prime Minister last week. All these policies are being developed at the same time.

Angela Smith: I thank the Minister for that answer, but does he agree that there should be a common framework for environmental standards across the whole United Kingdom after Brexit?

George Eustice: As the hon. Lady will be aware, through the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, we are initially bringing across all existing EU legislation as it pertains to the environment. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has also outlined plans for a new environmental body, and we are in discussion with the devolved Administrations about their involvement and a UK framework in these matters.
Bill Wiggins (North Herefordshire) (Con): Park keeper or food producer—whatever the future for farming is going to be, does my hon. Friend agree that it must be possible to earn a living out of farming?

George Eustice: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, who has a lot of experience in these matters and an understanding of the industry. He is absolutely right. There will be parts of the country where some farmers choose to do more by way of delivering environmental outcomes, and in other parts they may focus more on food production. Either way, we want a vibrant, profitable farming industry across our country.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): In the Prime Minister’s speech last Friday, she said that there would be no compromise on environmental standards and animal welfare standards, which was welcome. What guarantees can the Minister give to Welsh and UK farm producers that they will not be disadvantaged by lower-standard food entering the UK market following post-Brexit trade deals?

George Eustice: Both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have always been consistently clear that we will not lower our high animal welfare standards and high food standards in this country in pursuit of a trade deal.

Marine Environment

7. Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve the marine environment.

Dr Coffey: In the UK marine environment, protecting the marine environment to ensure that it is known as a true champion for the environment. Through her foundation, she is doing a lot of work to make sure we reduce our use of plastics and improve the circular economy.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What about coral?

Dr Coffey: Not many people know this, but we have some of the most spectacular cold-water coral reefs in the world in these fair islands. They are a protected feature of the Canyons marine conservation zone, and the Scottish Government are also protecting coral in some of their marine protected areas. We have re-engaged with the international coral reef initiative and will seek ways to promote its importance at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting next month.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I beg the Minister not to be too parochial? This is a global challenge for all our lives. We have a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association meeting coming up in London. Is it not about time that she and her boss went there to make common cause across the 52 nations to do something on a global scale that is meaningful?

Dr Coffey: There are now 53 Commonwealth nations since the Gambia rejoined last month. We are working together with other Commonwealth nations through the Commonwealth Secretariat to have an ambitious blue charter that will focus on the challenges the hon. Gentleman sets out.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) is right that the threats to our oceans are international, not national. It is good to take action on plastics locally, but plastics in the sea, the acidification threatening coral reefs and many other things call for international action. What leadership will this Government give at that level?

Dr Coffey: I would like to think that the UK is the international leader on these issues. As I said to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), this is an international matter: all this literally moves around the world. I have recently been to the United States and Canada, and we are working on this with Canada, which has the G7 presidency this year. We are leading the way on dealing with ocean acidification, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that that is very much at the top of the agenda for this Government.
Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): At the last EFRA questions on 25 January, I said to the Secretary of State:

“the question for fishing, given all the tonnes he will take from the European Union, is this: where is it going, and when?”

The Secretary of State answered:

“On to the plates of people from the Western Isles to the south-west of England, who can enjoy the fantastic produce that our fishermen catch every day.” — [Official Report, 25 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 396.]

I said, “Good dodge”, and he replied, “Thank you.” Today, I wonder whether we can get an answer to the question with no dodge. Given all the tonnes the UK Government tell fishermen they will take from the European Union, where is it going, and when?

Dr Coffey: The Government are, of course, still seeking a trade deal, but the hon. Gentleman should also be aware of the fact that countries such as Norway and Iceland, which are independent states, have control of their waters and grant access to them. There are annual negotiations for shared stocks, and we will continue to be part of those negotiations.

Leaving the EU: Economic Viability of Farming

8. Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): What steps he is taking to support the economic viability of farming after the UK leaves the EU. [*904255*]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Leaving the European Union provides the UK with an opportunity to improve the profitability of the agriculture sector. In our consultation document, we set out an approach to support that objective, and we are seeking the views of the industry on a range of measures to improve the competitiveness of the farming sector.

Since it is International Women’s Day, may I take this opportunity to congratulate Minette Batters, who has recently become the first ever woman president of the National Farmers Union?

Hannah Bardell: I join the Minister in that sentiment. Brexit is by far the greatest threat to Scottish farming. Given that Scotland has proportionately higher rates of common agricultural policy funding than elsewhere and that the types of farming that can take place in Scotland are very specific, will the Minister commit here and now to making sure that no subsidies to Scotland are cut after Brexit?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady will be aware of our intention that agricultural policy and the design of individual schemes will be very much a matter for the devolved Administrations. I look forward to seeing some of the proposals and suggestions that may come from the Scottish Government. We have offered to share our proposals with them so that they can learn from some of our analysis.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am proud that Vale of Evesham asparagus has been granted protected geographical indication status by the EU, which will help to boost its brand recognition and sales. Will PGI status still be recognised post Brexit?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Vale of Evesham asparagus obviously has a fantastic reputation across our country and, indeed, around the world. On protected food names, our intention is that the existing legislation will come across through the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. Third countries can already seek designations for the EU market, and the designations we already have in the UK will be protected through our domestic legislation.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) is surprisingly shy and self-effacing this morning. We are unlikely to reach Question 12, so if the hon. Gentleman wants to favour the House with his thoughts on this question, which is not dissimilar to his own, he is welcome to do so.

12. [904259] Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Thank you, Mr Speaker. One way to make small farms viable is to add value to their product. I was brought up on a small dairy farm, and my brother is now a successful cheesemaker—it is rather good cheese. Will the Minister undertake to instruct his officials to encourage small farms to go down this route and, as and when best practice is developed, will it be shared with the Scottish Government, because in my case this is, of course, a devolved matter?

Mr Speaker: The House will be most grateful to the hon. Gentleman, as will the hon. Gentleman’s brother.

George Eustice: We recognise the importance of our small family farms, and we also recognise that some of them may face more challenges in a transition from the old system to the future one. In our paper, we set out detailed proposals on a gradual transition to give them time to prepare, and we also set out a number of measures to help to support productivity, add value and get a fairer price for their products. We would of course be more than happy to share our proposals with the Scottish Government.

15. [904262] Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Shropshire farmers are pleased with some of the mood music coming from the Government about the financial support that they will get in a post-Brexit world. Will the Minister or one of his senior officials commit to come to the Shropshire show this year and continue that dialogue with our Shropshire farmers?

George Eustice: I thank my hon. Friend for that invitation, and either I or another Minister would be delighted to attend the Shropshire show, which will be part of this year’s agricultural show programme. It will be an important opportunity for us to engage with the industry.

Animal Welfare

10. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve animal welfare on farms. [*904257*]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): We are firmly committed to maintaining and improving our world-leading animal welfare standards. Our consultation paper sets out the options we are
considering as we leave the EU, such as pilot schemes that offer payments to farmers delivering higher welfare outcomes. We are also producing improved animal welfare codes for meat chickens, laying hens, and pigs.

Luke Hall: I thank the Minister for that answer. There are currently circumstances in which someone who has been charged with serious animal welfare offences is able to acquire new livestock, under the guise of it belonging to a partner, in the run-up to their trial. That can result in serious cases of neglect and cruelty, and there has been such a case in my constituency. Does the Minister agree that anybody charged with the most serious type of animal welfare offences should not be allowed to acquire new livestock in the run-up to their trial? Will he meet me and the leader of South Gloucestershire Council to discuss that matter?

George Eustice: The Animal Welfare Act 2006 gives courts the power to impose a disqualification order on anyone found guilty of causing unnecessary suffering to animals. That can disqualify someone not only from owning or keeping animals but, crucially, from having any influence over the way in which an animal is kept. If someone is suspected of breaching the terms of a disqualification order, the matter should be reported to the relevant authorities. My hon. Friend will understand that there is a difference if someone has been charged but not yet prosecuted, and I would be happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Minister will be aware of long-standing public health concerns about the routine overuse of antibiotics on UK farms, yet we now hear that such use is five times higher on American farms, particularly for US beef production. What conversations is he having with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that opening the markets to US beef does not happen, and that we do not have a public health crisis in this country?

George Eustice: The Animal Welfare Act 2006 gives courts the power to impose a disqualification order on anyone found guilty of causing unnecessary suffering to animals. That can disqualify someone not only from owning or keeping animals but, crucially, from having any influence over the way in which an animal is kept. If someone is suspected of breaching the terms of a disqualification order, the matter should be reported to the relevant authorities. My hon. Friend will understand that there is a difference if someone has been charged but not yet prosecuted, and I would be happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

Game Sales

11. Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What steps his Department is taking to support the sale of game in shops and restaurants. [904258]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Game is an important part of our food heritage, and it is a draw on menus across the UK and served in many establishments. Exports of game meat were worth £9 million in 2016 and £7 million in 2017. We have no specific plans to promote UK game meat, but we continue to raise the profile and reputation of UK food and drink overseas through the Food is GREAT campaign.

Jim Shannon: The Minister will be aware that the game sector is worth £114 million to the industry back home. I suspect he will also be aware that the European market, in particular in France, has decreased. Is he prepared to consider introducing and promoting game in the far east, especially in China, because that market is just crying out for game for people’s plates?

George Eustice: I regularly take part in trade delegations with the UK Government, and a couple of years ago I attended the Anuga food conference in Cologne, where there was a producer and exporter of UK game meat. I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and consider his proposals in this area.

Topical Questions

T1. [904266] Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Since the last DEFRA questions, the Department has continued to work on plans for our departure from the European Union and we have published our Command Paper on future agricultural policy. We have laid legislation to introduce mandatory CCTV in slaughterhouses, taking forward our agenda to enhance animal welfare. Parliament has also recently debated and passed legislation to strengthen laws on combating litter.

Mr Hollobone: Remainers and leavers agree that one of the very worst aspects of our EU membership is the common fisheries policy. Can the Minister confirm that we are leaving it on 29 March next year, that the British fishing industry can be relaunched as a result, and that he will not trade away our newly re-won sovereignty over fishing in the interests of a wider trade deal?

George Eustice: We have always been clear that when we leave the European Union, we leave the common fisheries policy and become an independent coastal state under international law. There are, of course, always annual negotiations—even for countries outside the EU—to agree an approach on the management of shared stocks, and we envisage that such meetings will continue. I can confirm that the UK Government’s view is that there is a trade discussion to take place. We want a free trade agreement and a fisheries discussion to take place, and we want to take back control of our waters.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Last week’s freezing temperatures caused chaos to water supplies this week. Households in London were among those hardest hit, with customers widely reporting a systemic failure by Thames Water to comply with its legal obligation to provide 10 litres of water per person for every day that a customer is disconnected. Will the Minister confirm that that was the case and, if so, when the Department was notified, as is the requirement? What actions does she intend to take against companies that fail to meet that obligation?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): As I said in my recent statement to the House, I have ordered Ofwat to undertake a review of what has been happening. I
have asked for a report to be made available—there might be an interim one by the end of this month—and I will be able to update the hon. Lady after that.

**Holly Lynch:** I hope that we can ensure that water is getting to customers who are still without connected water supply this week. Given that executives at the top nine water and sewage companies in England earned a combined total of nearly £23 million in 2017 and those companies have paid out £18.1 billion in dividends since 2006, but that Ofwat has already said that taking action on pay, dividends and tax structures is not in its current thinking, what is the Government’s plan to rebalance executive pay with investment in infrastructure and resilience and to get a grip on our water companies if Ofwat has said it does not intend to do so?

**Dr Coffey:** As we set out in our strategic policy statement to Ofwat, there is an expectation of the increased investment that needs to be made by the industry, and the price review is under way. Water companies will be coming out with their consultation, but when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State spoke to the water industry at Water UK a few weeks ago, he read it the riot act. He has said that he will give Ofwat whatever powers it needs so that the water companies will up their game.

**T5. [904270] Damien Moore (Southport) (Con):** In my constituency, plastic debris is often washed up on the town’s beach, harming the local ecosystem and damaging tourism. Does my hon. Friend agree that reducing plastic waste is essential for the regeneration of Britain’s seaside towns?

**Dr Coffey:** Absolutely. As a child I lived in Formby, so I visited Southport many times. My hon. Friend is right that plastic does not belong on the beach or in the sea. I commend the work that has been done, but he will be aware of our ongoing measures to reduce the amount of plastic entering the ocean and, therefore, being left on our beaches.

**T2. [904267] Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD):** The Committee on Toxicity is reviewing the most recent research on folic acid. If it advises the Government that the maximum recommended intake should be increased or abolished, will the Minister commit to following the scientific evidence, and successful practice in other countries, by amending bread and flour regulations to require the fortification of flour with folic acid, which reduces neural tube defects?

**George Eustice:** The hon. Lady will be aware that this issue is shared between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The former leads on folic acid and we lead on labelling issues. It is the case that there is a complexity in EU law. EU regulations now require that all products that have flour must include labelling. That creates burdensome problems for the industry, but if there is a recommendation, we will look at it sensibly. Once we leave the EU, we will have an opportunity to adopt a slightly different approach.

**T6. [904271] Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** What has the Minister done to stop our songbirds from being trapped and eaten in Cyprus?

**Dr Thérèse Coffey:** My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue. We are part of an international convention on migratory species. Illegal trapping in Cyprus has been a long-running sore. I commend the Ministry of Defence, police and the armed forces at the sovereign base in Cyprus for working so hard to tackle this issue. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has shown that there has been a 70% fall in the amount of illegal poaching.

**Mr Speaker:** I am so glad that the right hon. Gentleman does not represent a migratory species, and I doubt that proposition would be the subject of a Division of the House.

**T3. [904268] Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab):** In the light of the Secretary of State’s warning to water companies to address public concerns on prices, is he aware of the nine water companies that are committed to the Keep Me Posted campaign to ensure that consumers have the right to choose paper bills and statements?

**Dr Coffey:** Customers can choose to keep paper bills. Water companies, like many other companies, tend to offer a discount if people choose to switch to electronic communication, but I am sure that customers can take this matter up directly through the Consumer Council for Water if it is proving to be a problem.

**T7. [904272] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con):** Earlier this week, thousands of my constituents had their water shut off by Southern Water due to poor winter preparedness. What discussions has the Department had with the water industry and Ofwat, the regulator, to ensure that this does not happen in future winters?

**Dr Coffey:** Officials have been in regular touch with the water companies, and on Tuesday, I convened a meeting of water company chief executives, Ofwat and Water UK. As I announced to the House, I have asked Ofwat to undertake a review to look into the practices that happened.

**T4. [904269] Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab):** The Command Paper includes the line: “We will adopt a trade approach which promotes... lower prices for consumers”, which I find rather worrying. Is it not the case that food prices are already historically low? Lower prices will not do anything for British farmers. We need good-quality, affordable and healthy food, not a race to the bottom to get ever cheaper food.

**George Eustice:** The point that we are making is that in the long term, there may be opportunities in certain sectors, particularly for food that we are unable to produce in this country, to have lower prices for certain products. However, the hon. Lady makes an important point. Generally, we have low and stable food prices in this country, and countries that are fully dependent on importing all their food tend to have higher prices and less choice.

**T8. [904273] Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con):** Given the intention to use public money to promote public good, does my hon. Friend agree that as well as rewarding farmers for looking after...
the environment, we should support growers who contribute to public health by growing healthy fruit and vegetables?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes a very important point—as a former fruit and vegetable grower, I should perhaps declare an interest—and she is absolutely right. We believe that our future policy, in so far as it supports innovation, will be open to the horticulture sector so that it can invest in its future, and we also talk about the importance of promoting nutritious food.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): The Government said in court that they considered it sufficient to take “a pragmatic, less formal approach” to areas of poor air quality. Portsmouth has consistently breached World Health Organisation guidelines, with 95 premature deaths each year attributed to air pollution. Does the Minister therefore consider it appropriate to take an informal approach to preventing deaths and protecting the health of my constituents?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I think that the hon. Gentleman is selectively quoting from the judgment. However, this Government take air quality very seriously. Portsmouth is expected to be compliant within the next two to three years. The Government have been using the benchmark of a charging clean air zone, which would take at least four years to come into place. The hon. Gentleman might well be shaking his head, but he needs to be working with his council on what it is doing to improve local roads and what it is working on regarding public health. I am sure that he will work alongside Councillor Donna Jones, who is making great efforts to improve air quality.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): The EU Commission’s position on fisheries has been widely reported in the last 24 hours. It states that “existing reciprocal access to fisheries has been broadly respected”.

It also seems to suggest that any future trade deal will be heavily dependent on EU fishermen maintaining the current unfair access to British waters. Agreeing to this position is clearly unacceptable to fishing communities around the UK. Will my hon. Friend confirm that the Government consider the EU’s position to be just as unacceptable?

George Eustice: Yes. I simply say to my hon. Friend that this is an EU position. It currently benefits considerably from access to UK waters. At the moment, the UK fleet accesses around 100,000 tonnes of fish in EU waters, but the EU accesses 700,000 tonnes of fish in UK waters, so it would say that, wouldn’t it? That is not a position that the UK Government share.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I draw the Minister’s attention to the very serious oil spill stretching from Pymmes brook in my constituency right down the River Lea to the Olympic Park. This has happened for the second time in two years. Is it not time for the Environment Agency, the Canal & River Trust, the local authorities and Thames Water to get together, once they have cleaned up the spill, to see what they can do to prevent such spills?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I have already replied to the right hon. Gentleman about this point through answers to written questions. The Environment Agency has traced the waste oil to a potential polluter, but I cannot give further details due to the ongoing investigation. I assure him that the Environment Agency carries out pollution prevention visits at industrial premises along that area and, of course, we are still working to clean it up.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Last week’s Brexit paper referred to the availability of food, but made zero reference to the scandal that one in 12 British adults had gone a whole day without it. Why do the Government not care about people going hungry?

George Eustice: We do care about people going hungry. We have a number of initiatives to support food banks and ensure that food is redistributed. We are also reforming and improving the benefits system to help people back into work, which is obviously the best option.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Minister will be aware of the concern expressed by Northern Ireland farmers and other food producers about cross-border trade. Does the Minister agree that we need an arrangement that will accommodate everyone?

George Eustice: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman. I met him and a number of others yesterday to discuss the particular challenges of the Northern Ireland border, and I can reassure him that the Government are fully apprised of that concern.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Gainsborough, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, was asked—

National Audit Office: Single-use Plastics

1. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What steps the National Audit Office is taking to reduce the use of single-use plastics in that organisation.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The National Audit Office takes environmental commitments very seriously. Since 2011 it has operated an environmental management scheme certified by the International Standards Organisation, which includes setting challenging targets to reduce or eliminate waste in a number of areas. The NAO has already taken several steps to minimise the use of single-use plastics. For example, it does not use single-use plastic bottles or water cups, and encourages the use of reusable coffee cups in its staff café by offering a discount on the cost of hot drinks.

Mr Hollobone: Will my hon. Friend encourage the NAO to be an exemplar for all public bodies by eliminating the use of single-use plastics?

Sir Edward Leigh: My hon. Friend is an exemplar of an assiduous Member of Parliament, and I will certainly encourage the NAO to be an exemplar as well. Let me say in passing that the NAO’s catering team has made a
deal with one of its main suppliers to collect and reuse packaging from catering deliveries. Cardboard and single-use plastics have been replaced by reusable plastic crates. Isn’t that marvellous?

**CHURCH COMMISSIONERS**

_The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—_

**Church Investors Group**

3. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What proposals the Church Commissioners have as part of the Church Investors Group for holding businesses to account on executive pay and climate change measures. [904240]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church Investors Group manages a total fund of £17 billion, approximately £8 billion of which represents the Church Commissioners’ assets. The commissioners have discharged their stewardship responsibilities for a long time by voting on issues including executive remuneration and climate change, and, most recently, adding to the criteria gender diversity on boards, the disclosure of company pay ratios, and the payment of at least the living wage to staff.

Diana Johnson: Will the right hon. Lady set out in a little more detail the approach that the Church Commissioners are taking to ensure that businesses take the issue of climate change very seriously?

Dame Caroline Spelman: That is one of the stewardship responsibilities, and commissioners will vote against chairs of companies if they are assessed as not having made sufficient progress in addressing climate change. I am pleased to be able to share the good news that when a resolution was filed by the Church Commissioners and the New York State Comptroller asking Exxon to report on how its business model would help to tackle climate change, 62.3% of shareholders voted in favour of it despite opposition from the board.

**Wi-Fi and Broadband**

4. **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): What plans the Church of England has to make its buildings available for broadcasting (a) wi-fi and (b) broadband signal to improve connectivity in rural areas. [904241]

5. **Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What plans the Church of England has to make its buildings available for broadcasting (a) wi-fi and (b) broadband signal to improve connectivity in rural areas; and if she will make a statement. [904243]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church of England recently signed an accord with the Government to enable churches to improve broadband and mobile connectivity, particularly in rural areas. It sets out how the Church can collaborate with providers to help to achieve that.

**Victoria Prentis:** The tower of St Peter in Drayton, for example, could really help with connectivity in an area that suffers from a lack of connectivity. Could my right hon. Friend give my constituents some guidance as to how best to find their way through the planning system, to help them make an application in relation to the church?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** My hon. Friend’s constituency has seen a significant improvement in broadband coverage, which is currently at 95.5%—up from 19% in 2010. However, there are undoubtedly not spots, and I encourage her to get churches to contact Church House to find out how they can avail themselves of this new opportunity. In this accord, the Church has reached agreement with broadband providers to provide a standard contract to make that easy. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Lord Gardiner, for this initiative on working together to get our rural and urban mobile and broadband not spots covered.

**Michael Tomlinson:** I pay tribute to the right hon. Friend for her part in securing the accord. On International Women’s Day, it seems appropriate to mention Lady St Mary church in Wareham in my constituency, which is already installing telecommunications equipment in its— or her, I should say—tower. What more can my right hon. Friend do to encourage others to follow where Wareham and Dorset are leading?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** My hon. Friend is doing a good job of demonstrating to the whole House the difference it can make when we, as Members of Parliament, make our constituents in not spots aware of this new agreement. If Members have churches with tall towers or spires, these can be used to bounce the broadband signal into existing not spots. The example, on International Women’s Day, of the church he refers to gives encouragement to all. I know that the Isle of Purbeck suffers from poorer coverage, and I would encourage him to get the churches in his constituency to apply too.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I hear what the right hon. Lady says, but will she include in the work that the Church is doing churches that have been closed? They are often in the most rural and isolated areas, and their status is sometimes unclear. This could be a very important way in which we could make use of these buildings.

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** The Church of England has put its entire assets at the disposal of the Government to help crack the problem of the not spots—that includes its churches, its schools and its land, where necessary. For example, we can beam a signal from a church spire to the brow of a hill—the land may belong to the Church—down into the next village, which does not have a signal, and thereby get coverage. Those assets are all bound up in this accord.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Lady for her responses. It is really good news that the Church of England is making its buildings available for this purpose. However, does she agree that it is
equally important that historical artefacts, which can be displayed tremendously in small parishes in rural communities that have dedicated Royal British Legion facilities, could also be displayed in buildings owned by the Church of England across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Dame Caroline Spelman: This new accord on wi-fi and mobile coverage will make the churches a hot spot, not a not spot, in communities. That may well bring in people who want to have the benefit of a good signal and, by the way, to discover the wonderful heritage and artefacts that the churches offer. I should add that although this accord has been signed with the Church of England, the Government want to offer the same opportunity to other denominations, because the aim is universal coverage.

**ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE**

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission was asked—

**Political Parties: Compliance**

6. Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): What estimate the Electoral Commission has made of its annual spending on compliance measures for political parties.

**Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South): The Electoral Commission has a statutory duty to monitor the political finance rules and take all reasonable steps to secure compliance with them. The amount of money spent on compliance measures fluctuates and tends to intensify around electoral events. The full range of this activity includes creating comprehensive guidance for parties, campaigners and candidates; engaging with parties directly; monitoring campaign activity; checking and publishing financial returns from parties; and the enforcement of the rules. In the 2017-18 financial year, the commission’s budget for its political finance and regulation directorate is £2.66 million.

**Sir Patrick McLoughlin:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that answer. Will she make the point to the Electoral Commission on our behalf that it is all very well to put these substantial extra compliance costs on to the political parties, but the commission is fully funded by the taxpayer, while political parties have to raise their own finances?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am sure that officials from the Electoral Commission will have heard the right hon. Gentleman’s comments. The commission provides year-round advice and regularly engages with political parties, as he doubtless knows from his many meetings with the commission in his previous role as Chairman of his party. I am sure that it would welcome the opportunity to discuss any such suggestions with him again.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): Following the disgraceful decision by the Government yesterday to leave campaign via the Democratic Unionist party, meaning that the public have no idea where that money came from, what more can my hon. Friend and the Electoral Commission do to ensure that we have full transparency in our electoral and democratic system?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The commission welcomes the existing order, which will for the first time provide information about donations and loans received by parties in Northern Ireland. However, the commission also wants to see transparency in donations going back to 2014, as Parliament envisaged, and it would support the Government in laying a further order to provide for full transparency going back to 2014.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Charities and academics are warning the Government that the trials for compulsory voter ID this May could risk disenfranchising large numbers of vulnerable people. How will the Electoral Commission monitor these pilots, which are a disproportionate response to the scale of electoral fraud?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend makes an important point on the pilots that the UK Government are carrying out in the forthcoming elections. No one wants to see voters turned away from polling stations, but the extent to which voters in pilot areas are unable to vote on 3 May, and why that is the case, will be key elements of the commission’s statutory evaluation of the pilot schemes. I am sure that the commission will want to hear directly from anyone who finds themselves affected as a result.

**CHURCH COMMISSIONERS**

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

**Environmental Taxation Funding**

7. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): How is the Churches and religious institutions to apply for funding from the Department for Communities and Local Government?

**Mr Sheerman:** Many of the churches and other religious buildings that I am aware of are relatively ignorant about the large amount of money from landfill tax that Entrust controls. If the Churches and religious institutions are engaged in broader community activities, they will qualify for such funds. Could that be made more widely known?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** The fact that the hon. Gentleman has made us aware of that fact in the House, and that it will be recorded in Hansard, is
extremely helpful. The landfill communities fund has spent £106 million on the restoration of places of worship since it was created, but the relatively new plastic bags tax fund is another source of funds for places of worship in our constituencies and goes beyond the 10-mile radius from a landfill site, which is a constraint on the landfill fund.

**Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** We have a large number of church buildings in Scotland, and the burden of maintaining them is onerous for the Churches that own them. Will those Churches be able to apply for similar funding north of the border?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** I am not responsible for the Church in Scotland. The Church Estates Commissioner is responsible only for the Church of England, but I am perfectly prepared to make inquiries on the hon. Gentleman’s behalf with the Church of Scotland.

**Homeless People**

8. **Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps the Church of England is taking to support homeless people.

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman):** The Church of England has many local parish-based initiatives to support the homeless. The Church also partners with organisations nationally, including Crisis. I think it will be of interest to Members to know that 3,000 people took shelter in churches last winter. That was 53% up on the year before, and I strongly suspect that that number will increase, given the severity of the winter that we have just experienced.

**Rachael Maskell:** I quote: “For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me”. We cannot wait until 2027 to see homelessness eliminated, and I would like to know how the Church of England will use its estate more to ensure that people have shelter in the coming year.

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** The hon. Lady reads that verse, which always challenges me. One day, when I meet my maker and he asks me, “When I was homeless, did you shelter me?” I have to be able to answer, and the best answer that I can give relates to the remarkable growing initiative within the Church for night shelters. During the recent cold snap, churches were often mentioned in the news as places where homeless people could shelter from the conditions, and I pay tribute to my former headmistress, who helped to set up a night shelter at Holy Trinity, Bishop’s Stortford. I went to see for myself how the church had been adapted, with a toilet and shower to make the accommodation suitable, and how volunteers prepared hot meals and were trained to look after the homeless people who came to take shelter.
10.30 am

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement on the Care Quality Commission’s review of children and young people’s mental health services.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): Not enough scripture is quoted in this House, but I cannot match what was just said. However, I can tell the House that the Care Quality Commission published its “Are we listening? Review of Children and Young People’s Mental Health Services” report this morning, and, yes, we are listening. It was the second piece of work commissioned by the Prime Minister in January 2017 to look at this area of services, and the findings include examples of good or innovative practice and of dedicated people—we thank every one of them—working in every part of the system and a number of areas with strong practice ensuring that patients and families are involved in planning care, but there are also concerns around the join-up between children’s services.

We thank the CQC and Dr Paul Lelliott for their work.

The Government have already committed to making available an additional £1.4 billion to improve children and young people’s mental health services to deliver on the commitments in “Future in mind” and NHS England’s five year forward view for mental health, and the CQC welcomes that progress in its report. I know that the hon. Lady and others have worries about this, but spend is reaching the front line. By 2020-21, we have committed to ensuring that 70,000 more children and young people each year will have access to high-quality NHS mental healthcare when they need it. However, there is so much more to do. Claire Murdoch, the national mental health director for NHS England, said in response to the report:

“CAMHS services are now improving, but from a starting point of historic underfunding and legacy under staffing, relative to rapidly growing need.”

We see those things across the service.

In December, the Department of Health, jointly with the Department for Education, published “Transforming children and young people’s mental health provision”. That Green Paper responds to a number of the problems raised by the CQC in this report, and sets out a range of proposals to strengthen how schools and specialist NHS mental health services work together and to reduce the amount of time that children and young people have to wait to access specialist help. The proposals are backed by an additional £300 million of funding. We have carried out extensive face-to-face consultation on the Green Paper proposals and have received a high volume of responses to our online consultation, and we thank everyone for that. We will respond to this CQC review, alongside the Green Paper consultation, in the summer.

The report calls for the Secretary of State to use the inter-ministerial group on mental health to guarantee greater collaboration across Departments in prioritising mental health. We agree, and that recommendation is already in hand. The IMG has already contributed to the development of the Green Paper and will continue to provide leadership on the issues that the report raises. The CQC also recommends that everyone who works, volunteers or cares for children and young people is trained in mental health awareness. We are already rolling out mental health first aid training to every secondary school and have committed to rolling out mental health awareness training to all primary schools by 2022. The Government and Ministers remain wholly committed to making mental health everyone’s business and building good mental health for our children and young people.

Barbara Keeley: The report is the latest piece of recent evidence revealing systematic failures in our mental health services. It follows similar reports of the past few weeks that call into question the Government’s claims to have made mental health a priority equal to physical health. In this report, we see evidence of services actively putting up barriers to treatment, resulting in children and young people having to reach crisis point before being able to get access to the right treatment. Children are suffering because of those high eligibility thresholds.

We know that 50% of mental health problems develop before the age of 14 and that 75% develop before the age of 18. Does the Minister recognise that imposing high eligibility thresholds means that children and young people are treated only when their condition becomes more serious? These high thresholds are even prompting GPs to tell children to pretend that their mental health is worse than it is. Will the Minister agree to look into referral criteria as a matter of urgency, so that children and young people get the proper treatment at the right time?

The report links these excessively high eligibility thresholds and reductions in access with funding reductions and not enough capacity for services to respond to local needs, so, whatever the Minister says, clearly not enough money is reaching the frontline. Can the Minister tell us how he plans to address that? The report, like the CQC’s recent report on rehabilitation services, raises concerns about out-of-area placements, which we know are a barrier to recovery. Will he tell the House what action is being taken to increase the number of in-patient beds available locally?

Finally, what will the Minister do to address the clear problems, highlighted in this report and others, associated with the rigid transition at age 18 from child and adolescent to adult mental health services, which is also a barrier to accessing care?

Steve Brine: The hon. Lady rightly raises the issue of spend reaching the frontline; I said in my opening remarks that it is doing so, and she asked what evidence there was of that. Last year, there was a 20% increase in clinical commissioning group spend on children and young people’s mental health, rising from £516 million in 2015-16 to £619 million in 2016-17.

On the broader issues raised in the hon. Lady’s response, I said that we have made up to £1.4 billion available over five years to support transformation of these services, and there is the additional £300 million that I mentioned. I want to touch on waiting times, referral routes and workforce. We are the first Government to introduce waiting time standards, and that is relevant to children and young people’s mental health, too. We are meeting, or on track to meet, both targets. We will pilot a four-week waiting time for specialist children and young
people's NHS mental health services, as was outlined in the recent Green Paper. As I say, we are considering responses to that.

On referral routes, our Green Paper proposes senior designated leads and mental health support teams—a new workforce—based on the findings of the Department for Education's schools link pilot. They aim to improve the join-up with specialist services and to result in more appropriate referrals.

Barbara Keeley indicated dissent.

Steve Brine: The hon. Lady shakes her head; I can only tell her the facts. Health Education England's workforce plan recognises new ways of working as a cornerstone of delivering these improvements. HEE will also work with our partners to continue the expansion of these newly created roles in mental health services, and to consider the creation of new roles, such as that of early intervention workers, who would focus on child wellbeing as part of a psychiatrist-led team.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Many right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, but I remind Members that there are business questions immediately after these exchanges, followed by an important statement by the Home Secretary. Thereafter, the debate on International Women's Day is heavily subscribed, so there is a premium on brevity from Back and Front Benchers alike, and I want to move on, whether we have incorporated everybody or not, no later than 11 o'clock. Single-sentence questions are much to be preferred.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I commend the Government for promoting the Emotionally Healthy Schools project, which, in my constituency, is working well and engaging not just children who have challenges, but their families. Does the Minister agree that helping children with their mental health challenges needs to involve, wherever practical, their families, family relationships and inter-parental relationships, as recommended by the Early Intervention Foundation?

Steve Brine: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a point about families. I said that we are already rolling out mental health first aid training to every secondary school, which is of course important, and we are also committed to rolling out mental health awareness training to all primary schools by 2022. But to coin a phrase, it takes a village. This is about the state—of course, schools are part of that—but also the third sector, which has an important role to play. It is also absolutely about the love, support and Christian embrace of families.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): This is a very important issue, especially given that half of mental health problems are established by the age of 14. It is therefore particularly shocking that some children are receiving assistance only after attempting suicide. Claire Murdoch, the national mental health director of NHS England, has stated:

"Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services are now improving, but from a starting point of historic under-funding and legacy under-staffing”.

This report is surely an example of the latest reports in recent years demonstrating the impact of this Government's austerity-driven agenda on public services. By comparison, in Scotland, which had the UK's first ever dedicated mental health Minister, we have seen staffing for Scotland's psychology and children and young people's mental health care services at a record high, with a 79% increase since 2006. Surely as part of the Minister's response to these findings he will wish to look at the actions being taken in Scotland and learn from them.

Steve Brine: We always look at the actions being taken in Scotland and in all the devolved Administrations. The hon. Gentleman is right to touch on prevention, which was the first point he made. The proposals in the Green Paper are focused on providing significant support for schools to develop the work they already do on prevention and early intervention. Today's report talks about the many good things that are going on and, as I said, some of the things we have already taken forward with the Green Paper. While we are kicking this about, let us just remember in these exchanges that this is about the health of young people in England, whom we all represent.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): The CQC has recommended that Ofsted should be charged with looking at what schools are doing to support mental health. Will the Minister take that up with his ministerial colleagues in the Department for Education?

Steve Brine: I am sure my colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who is responsible for mental health, will be taking that up as she considers responses to the Green Paper. My hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) is absolutely right to raise that issue and I thank him for doing so.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): With increasing numbers of university students having mental health problems, what action will the Minister take to ensure better joined-up care, with better communication between home and university GPs and student welfare services?

Steve Brine: As a former student union president, I think that is a very good point. One key proposal in the Green Paper is about the new mental health support teams, which will be very important in that. The hon. Lady is right to say that they should work across higher education as well as the earlier forms of education.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): In the next few weeks, work will begin on the construction of a new mental health residential unit for young people in Cornwall, which is long overdue and much anticipated. It is a clear sign that this Government are investing in young people's mental health. However, we continue to have a problem with our clinical commissioning group in delivering frontline services, even though the Government are providing more money, so what steps will the Minister take to ensure that CCGs allocate the money provided to those services?

Steve Brine: I do not know the specific example that my hon. Friend raises, but he may wish to take it up with the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock. I did say that there was a 20% increase in clinical commissioning spend for
children and young people’s mental health between 2015-16 and 2016-17. We have all been frustrated about spend reaching the frontline, and we have made it very clear that we expect it to do so. I am pleased to see progress in the right trajectory.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): These damning findings come three years after we secured £1.25 billion extra over a five-year period. We know that that money has fallen well short of what was committed to three years ago. Will the Minister absolutely commit to make good the shortfall of money getting through to children’s mental health services?

Steve Brine: I thank my former ministerial colleague for that. We have not exactly been shy in investing in this area, both when he was a Minister in the Department and now. We have made £1.4 billion available over the five years to support the transformation of services—and the extra £300 million. He says this is a damning report, but we must remember that it is a report we commissioned. We do not hide from these things. The last time I responded to an urgent question from the hon. Member for Worthing West (Stephen Lloyd) it was on a CQC report on social care. We must not hide from these things and we do not want to bury our heads in the sand. We must recognise and build on the examples of good person-centred care that are taking place in our country at the moment, and that is why we are putting the money behind it. The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome the priority and funding that are coming from my hon. Friend. What is he doing to co-ordinate and support the devolved nations in this regard, such as Scotland where adolescent mental health waiting time targets were actually missed? We want to make sure that no British child is left behind, no matter what part of the UK they live in.

Steve Brine: That is an excellent point. I will make sure that my colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, is talking, as I know she is, to the devolved Administrations as she considers the responses to the Green Paper, which I am sure include responses from them.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The Care Quality Commission’s review found that children were waiting up to 18 months to receive treatment for their mental health conditions. In Lewisham, the Government are cutting the budget for child and adolescent mental health services by 5%. The Green Paper will not help children currently waiting. What will the Government do to address this?

Steve Brine: We will put the money in, publish a sensible strategy in a Green Paper, consider the responses and then take it forward, backed by the investment we think we need to deliver the strategy. That will be the same in Lewisham as in Winchester.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am sure that both sides of the House will welcome the commitment to 21,000 more personnel in mental health service provision by 2021, but can the Minister assure me that this will lead to more children accessing mental health services within the four-week target period?

Steve Brine: We talked about testing the four-week target in the Green Paper—it was one of its key pillars—and we hope to pilot the idea to test the impact of our additional investment on reducing waiting times. We will then assess the benefits and challenges and provide information on how the waiting time standard should be adapted to avoid perverse incentives—around thresholds, for instance.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): The Minister’s description of mental health provision will not be recognised by anyone providing or using services. Does he think that cutting the funding for the north west boroughs partnership year on year since 2011 has led to improved services for young people in St Helens?

Steve Brine: I do not know about the issue in St Helens. I will look into it, or ask my colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, to do so, and get her to write to the hon. Gentleman.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I very much welcome the Government’s commitment to mental health workers throughout England’s schools. Will my hon. Friend update the House on its timely roll-out?

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Some 75% of mental health problems start before the age of 18, but less than 10% of funding goes to young people. What can the Minister do to prioritise more funding for CAMHS?

Steve Brine: As I have said, we will be considering the four-week pilot as part of the Green Paper. We want to see these mental health first-aiders in schools, and as soon as we can give my hon. Friend an exact timetable on the situation Crawley, as well as elsewhere, I am sure that my colleague the Under-Secretary will do so.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): With the understaffing of mental health services in the recent Health Select Committee report on the nursing shortage, does the Minister accept that the Government’s decision to remove nursing bursaries, which has particularly affected the number of students training to be mental health nurses, was a mistake?

Steve Brine: No, I do not accept that it was a mistake. We need to increase the number of people coming into nursing, and we were turning away far too many who wanted to come into it. The workforce is obviously a huge challenge across the NHS, in primary care—my area—in secondary care and, of course, in mental health,
which is why the Secretary of State has said we will create 21,000 new posts by 2021 to support one of the biggest expansions in mental health services in Europe.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister will know from his own background that primary care does not always have the necessary expertise in mental health. How will he guarantee that every GP surgery will have the necessary capacity to deliver excellence in mental health services for our young people?

Steve Brine: That is a good point—and one that sits at the centre of my portfolio. GPs are generalists. As the Minister for cancer, I know that there is always criticism of their specialism in that, but, by their very nature, GPs cannot be specialists in everything. That is why the mental health support teams, which are at the heart of the proposal in the Green Paper, are a key part of our strategy, and we expect them to work closely with GPs and the Royal College of General Practitioners to upskill GPs, working within the multi-disciplinary teams, to help young people when they need that help.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Tomorrow, I am meeting the chief executive of my local mental health trust because we are so desperately worried about the mental health provision for young people in York. We are not only short of staff but short of resources. It takes time to train mental health staff, so what are the Government going to do in the interim to ensure that we have staff in the service?

Steve Brine: I hope that when the hon. Lady meets that person in her constituency tomorrow she will recognise the good work that is going on and the number of people who are going over and above to deliver the services to children and people. I should also say that one of her responsibilities as a Member of Parliament, as it is ours as Ministers, is to see to it that the sustainability and transformation partnerships in her area collaborate with all the various organisations in her constituency and that the traditional health and social care services are joined up with schools, police, probation services and mental health services, because ultimately it is one NHS.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister listen more carefully to the voice of parents? All my experience as chair of the Westminster Commission on Autism tells me that if parents think there is something wrong with their child—whether it is a mental health challenge or autism—they want early diagnosis and treatment, and they want it at the standard that they have in Sweden.

Steve Brine: I am very aware of the hon. Gentleman’s work on the Westminster Commission on Autism—he has a big event coming up in the next few weeks that I hope to go to. I completely agree with him, which is why it was so welcome that the CQC report highlighted Government proposals such as establishing dedicated mental health support teams in schools.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Phase 1 on the CQC review noted that there were unacceptable variations in quality. How can quality be provided more consistently throughout the country?

Steve Brine: That is an excellent point. The NHS is very good at sharing best practice; the challenge comes in implementing it. The report rightly says that there are very good examples of good person-centred care throughout the country. The challenge is to make sure that is rolled out everywhere. I suppose the answer is to focus on the workforce and the investment, and to make sure that we have in place the agreed strategy to take the sector with us and do that.
Business of the House

10.51 am

Valerie Vaz: (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House: The business for next week will include:

Monday 12 March—Remaining stages of the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill [Lords].

Tuesday 13 March—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his spring statement, followed by debate on motions relating to universal credit, children and young persons and social security.

Wednesday 14 March—General debate on European affairs (day 1).

Thursday 15 March—Conclusion of general debate on European affairs (day 2).

Friday 16 March—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 19 March will include:

Monday 19 March—Second Reading of the Secure Tenancies (Victims of Domestic Abuse) Bill [Lords], followed by debate on Welsh affairs.

Today, Parliament is flying the flag for International Women’s Day. This year is particularly special, as we mark the centenary of some women getting the right to vote. We will be celebrating women’s achievements throughout the year. I hope that all Members will host an Equali- tee party in their constituencies during the summer, to celebrate democratic equality and, yes, the opportunity to have cake and eat it. We have achieved much, but there is a long way to go. Today, the Home Office has launched a consultation on our proposals for a new domestic violence Bill, which will tackle the plight of the nearly 2 million people—mainly women—living with violence.

Today, as we think about opportunities for women, I feel lucky to have not one, not two, not even three but four brilliant female apprentices in my private office and parliamentary office. I know many Members are marking National Apprenticeship Week; speaking from my own experiences, I encourage any Member, and my own experiences, I encourage any Member, and every business, to offer the valuable experience of an apprenticeship to talented young people.

Lastly, this week sees the birthday of our own resident rock star: the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). I hear that he is 21 again, although I might be confusing that with his majority. [Laughter.] I am sure he is not much older than that. I hope the whole House will join me in wishing him a very happy birthday for tomorrow.

Valerie Vaz: (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business and also for her speech—I wonder whether that will happen every time. I am pleased that, despite telling me that statements would not be announced in the House, she has actually announced the date of the spring statement. It is an important statement, and it is business of the House. Is there any reason why the Leader of the House is announcing the business just one week and a day at a time? That seems to be a change, too.
On the Trade Bill, we discussed last week the fact that several amendments have been tabled. The Government are considering them carefully, as it is right to do. As I have always said in this Chamber, we will always consider amendments that are tabled to try to improve legislation as we enter into the important decision to leave the European Union and take steps to prepare ourselves in the best possible way. I am glad that the hon. Lady is happy about the statutory instrument debates. We will be having them next week, as she requested last week.

The hon. Lady asked about nursing training places. She will be aware that there will be an increase of 25%—the biggest increase ever. She also raises the question of plastics and what we are doing about them. I hope that she has signed up, as I have done, to plastic-free Lent. That is an attempt to minimise the use of single-use plastics during the Lent period and an opportunity for us to highlight the importance of reducing our use of plastics. Of course, the Government’s record on that is very good, with the determination in our 25-year environment plan to be the first generation that leaves our environment in a better state than we found it in.

The hon. Lady asks about the talk coming out of the United States on tariffs on steel and aluminium. We are very concerned about that. As she will be aware, we in the UK have made social and economic factors part of the consideration for public sector procurement of steel. We have commissioned research to identify high-value opportunities for UK steel worth up to nearly £4 billion a year by 2030, and we have taken great steps since 2013 to support our steel sector with the costs of renewables and climate change policies. The hon. Lady is right to raise concerns about US policy in this area, and the Prime Minister spoke with President Trump recently and raised our deep concern about his forthcoming announcement on steel and aluminium tariffs. The Prime Minister has noted that multilateral action is the only way to resolve the problem of global overcapacity in all parties’ interests.

The hon. Lady asked again about ministerial responsibilities. I can tell her that the list will be forthcoming as soon as possible, once the positions have been confirmed and clarified with all Departments.

The hon. Lady asked about the debates on the European Union, and I think she is happy that we are having them. They are, of course, in response to the request from many right hon. and hon. Members to be able to talk in general terms about their ideas and proposals for how we should leave the European Union. We had a very important speech from the Prime Minister last week, and the EU Council, where we hope to secure an implementation period, is coming up soon. Now is a very good time for all hon. and right hon. Members to put forward their thoughts and views.

Finally, the hon. Lady asks for representations about Ms Zaghari-Ratcliffe. She is absolutely right to raise that case, which we are very concerned about. She will know that the Foreign Secretary raised it with the Foreign Minister of Iran when he had the opportunity to do so, and the Foreign Office continues to do that at every opportunity.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I associate myself with the birthday wishes to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), whom I regard as an hon. Friend.
On 2 February this year, my private Member’s Bill, the Parking (Code of Practice) Bill, received its Second Reading thanks to support from the Government, the official Opposition and the Scottish National party, for which I am obliged. However, the Bill cannot proceed any further until a ways and means motion is tabled. Will the Leader of the House speak to our mutual friend the Patronage Secretary—the Chief Whip—and hopefully agree with him that it should be tabled sooner rather than later?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue. The Government have expressed support for a number of private Members’ Bills so far this Session, and we continue to work with the Members in charge. That will include bringing forward money resolutions on a case-by-case basis in the usual way.

**Mr Speaker:** In offering my best birthday wishes to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for tomorrow, perhaps I can borrow the legendary observation to me from the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and apply it to the hon. Gentleman: fortunately he is not yet at the age at which the cost of the candles exceeds the cost of the cake.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Thank you very much for that, Mr Speaker. I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week and for her very kind birthday wishes. Birthdays nowadays are more to be noted than celebrated—as are majorities of 21.

I, too, wholeheartedly welcome International Women’s Day and pay tribute to all the incredible women throughout history who have contributed so much to progress in our communities, while acknowledging that we have still so much to do to reach the truly equal society to which we should all aspire. I am sure that the whole House, like half the world, saw the incredible speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) yesterday on misogyny: a powerful, profound personal account of some of the misogynistic abuse that she has suffered just for being a young woman in politics. On International Women’s Day, will the Leader of the House at least consider making misogyny a hate crime and proactively legislating to ensure that we could start to make this part of the history of the women’s movement in this country?

On Saturday, the Scottish National party is having a day of action against Royal Bank of Scotland branch closures—an issue that continues to upset and concern communities we represent. The Scottish Affairs Committee, which I chair, has finally secured RBS’s chief executive officer, Ross McEwan, to come before us to answer questions about this closure programme. However, the one group of people we have not heard from and who still refuse to speak to us are the majority shareholder—this Government. The Government are the stewards of the public interest in this. Will the Leader of the House therefore join me in insisting that Treasury Ministers agree to come before the Scottish Affairs Committee to answer questions about what they are doing to represent our interests?

We need a statement on the emerging constitutional crisis on Brexit. The Government now say that they will push ahead with amendments to clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill without any agreement from the Scottish Government, who are still progressing their continuity Bill. The BBC says that it has a letter in which the Government say that they cannot counter the “power grab” claims. Perhaps they cannot do that because a power grab is exactly what it is.

**Andrea Leadsom:** On the hon. Gentleman’s first point, I am very appalled, as I think all hon. Members are, to hear of the experiences of his colleague, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black). I sincerely apologise to her, on behalf of everybody here, for the appalling abuse she has received: it is utterly unacceptable. Of course, in my role as Leader of the House of Commons, if she wanted to come and talk to me I would be very happy to do so to see whether there is anything specific I can do for her.

As the hon. Gentleman knows and as you know, Mr Speaker, we have worked tirelessly, cross-party, to put in place our independent complaints procedure. I am not sure whether, if that were up and running today, it would have gone some way towards improving the hon. Lady’s situation. However, I certainly hope that our commitment across this House and in the other place to stamping out abuse and making our Parliament one of the best places to work and be employed in will stand us in good stead for the future.

On the hon. Gentleman’s second point, about RBS, I am very aware of the grave concerns about bank closures expressed on a number of occasions by Opposition Members. He will be aware that these are commercial decisions. There are procedures to go through before a bank decides to close, such as consultation with local communities. I point out that one of his hon. Friends has an Adjournment debate on banking in Scotland next week, on 14 March, and I am sure he will want to take part in that.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman raised the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and the Scottish National party’s continuity Bill. It is the Government’s position that the EU withdrawal Bill will provide consistency across the UK to ensure that all parts of the UK are ready for our departure from the EU. We are still hopeful that we can reach agreement with the devolved Administrations on the Bill in the coming weeks.

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): In a recent debate in the Lords on the family test, which is perhaps better called the family impact assessment, there was good cross-party support for Lord Farmer’s private Member’s Bill promoting a more satisfactory application of the test than currently appears to be the case, from several questions I have asked of Departments recently. Will the Leader of the House facilitate the safe passage of that Bill in the other place by liaising with the Leader of the House of Lords, so that it can be brought to this House for consideration as soon as possible?

**Andrea Leadsom:** First, I would like to commend and congratulate my hon. Friend for the amazing work she does across the parties and the Houses on supporting families. I totally share her desire to see the strengthening of families of all types. In particular, I know that she
shares my concern for the importance of early attachment and giving every baby the best start in life. I absolutely support her desire to see the family test carefully applied and giving every baby the best start in life. I absolutely share my concern for the importance of early attachment.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I note from the Leader of the House’s statement that the Backbench Business Committee has been given a holiday from days for Backbench Business debates. We have a number of outstanding applications waiting for time allocation, and I therefore hope that we will get some time before the Easter recess to get some of those unheard debates timetabled.

I am afraid that the chickens have come home to roost with regard to the membership of the Backbench Business Committee. Despite the fact that we had three members present on Tuesday, that is not quorate for our Committee. We require four; although we currently only have six members. We hope that the cavalry will come over the hill from the Conservative party, as there are two members missing at the moment. Will the Leader of the House look again at the quorum of the Backbench Business Committee? On a Committee of eight, a quorum of four seems excessive.

Andrea Leadsom: I gently point out to the hon. Gentleman that there is Government time next week for a Welsh affairs debate. As he will recall, we were all disappointed on St David’s day when, owing to the awful weather and the need for Members to get home before the train stations closed and so on, the debate was cancelled. I was at the No. 10 reception for St David’s day and we sadly missed out on the Welsh school choir, who could not get there. That was a great shame. We were delighted to offer Government time for that debate to continue to take place, notwithstanding that it is not under the hon. Gentleman’s Committee, but in Government time. I will of course ensure that I make representations where necessary for his outstanding applications.

I have discussed with colleagues what we can do to facilitate extra Conservative Members on the Backbench Business Committee and will continue to press for that. If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me on the quorum, I am happy to look at that matter seriously.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): You will know, Mr Speaker, that this House only works if conventions are followed. My hon. Friend for Wellingborough (Fiona Bruce) mentioned a private Member’s Bill. My private Member’s Bill passed its Second Reading on 1 December, and another one about constituencies passed its Second Reading on that day. Both were unopposed. Unfortunately, more than three months later, no money resolutions have been forthcoming. There can be only one private Member’s Bill in Committee at any one time. There is none in Committee because of this. This looks to be an obstruction of the private Member’s Bill system by the Government. I am sure that that is not the case—well, I am not sure that that is not the case. Will the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent statement next week, so that this can be discussed?

Mr Speaker: Earlier, the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) asked a question about migratory species, and in the course of the delivery of the question from the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), a number of Opposition Members noted that he has migrated from his usual seat to his new seat. I do not think any particular significance need be read into that, and I should assure the House that even if it is thought to be unusual—

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): He’s pro-Europe!

Mr Speaker: I do not think it suddenly means that the hon. Gentleman is pro the European Union. If the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) said that outside the Chamber, I rather imagine that the hon. Member for Wellingborough would be consulting m’learned friends. His behaviour is perfectly orderly.

Andrea Leadsom: I am slightly disappointed that my hon. Friend is a bit suspicious. How could he possibly think that, especially of me, since we are very much honourable Friends? I can say to him, as I did to our right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), that the Government have expressed support for a number of private Members’ Bills so far this Session—and the Government do support the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill, which my hon. Friend is taking through as a private Member’s Bill—and we will bring forward money resolutions on a case-by-case basis in the usual way.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I really appreciate the right hon. Lady’s comments about President Trump’s announcement on steel tariffs, but I am deeply concerned and I think we need the Secretary of State for International Trade to come and make an urgent statement next week. Some 10% of UK steel is exported to the US and 15% of the output of our automotive industry goes there, so this has huge implications, particularly post Brexit, and I would really appreciate the opportunity to debate it.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue. As I mentioned to the shadow Leader of the House, the Prime Minister has spoken to President Trump and raised our grave concern about his proposals. I can also tell the hon. Lady that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade is speaking with Wilbur Ross, the US Commerce Secretary, about this matter. She may be aware that there has been an overnight briefing that tariffs may not apply to allies and so on. This is a moving issue, and we will continue to take every step to protect the UK steel and aluminium sectors.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): On Monday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government made a welcome statement on housing and planning in this country. Sadly, it coincided with a meeting of the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government, so those of us on both sides of the House who have a degree of expertise in this area were unable to question him about the new policies. Equally, the estimates day debate on homelessness was heavily over-subscribed, so colleagues could make only very short speeches. Will the Leader of the House find time for a general debate in Government time on housing and planning, so that Members on both sides of the House can express their views and tease out some of the policies that the Government are proposing?
Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Prime Minister has been very clear that sorting out our broken housing market is one of the top priorities for her premiership. She is determined that young people should be able to aspire to a home of their own, and that means building more houses and changing planning, and it also means protecting tenants and sorting out things such as leases on new homes. All those are among the new policies of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

I just want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. The Government have implemented it, and it is part of our determination to deal with the problem of homelessness and rough sleeping in this country.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Cancer Research UK says that obesity is the second most preventable cause of cancer and the Government are reviewing their childhood obesity strategy, so may we have a debate on stopping junk food adverts before the 9 o’clock watershed to help to reduce childhood obesity?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely share the hon. Gentleman’s concern about childhood obesity. It really appears that we have a massively growing problem in this country. He may well want to seek an Adjournment debate, so that he can talk directly to a Minister about his own ideas.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): As we are aware, we have just approved more housing to be built in this country, and we can all say, “Yes, that’s good.” However, I could name councils—I will not do so this time—that have used private companies and estate agents to further their aims. My council, West Somerset Council, is being dragged into such a situation. May we have a debate on making sure that there is a clear understanding between developers, estate agents, planners and companies? If we do not have such understanding, situations are going to arise that will not help any of us in our future deliberations.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of keeping good boundaries. Ultimately, the aim is to produce more homes, so that more people can aspire to owning a home of their own. He may want to raise his specific concerns during questions to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, which will happen on Monday 12 March.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): As one of my very favourite feminists, Mr Speaker, may I wish you and everybody else a happy International Women’s Day? Will the Leader of the House consider a debate or Government statement on gender pricing? We now know that consumers have to pay on average 31% more for goods that are marketed or aimed specifically at women.

Andrea Leadsom: It is important that we think about violence, and I think the hon. Gentleman is speaking about violent deaths—

Mr Sheerman: Deaths on the road.

Andrea Leadsom: Deaths on the road—I beg his pardon but I did not hear that. He raises an incredibly important point, and across the world every day there are tragic and avoidable deaths. In the United Kingdom, our track record is good and improving, and numbers of road deaths are reducing. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to seek a Backbench Business debate to talk about road safety, or an Adjournment debate to raise that specific issue.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows well the serious concerns of the people of Redditch regarding the centralisation of paediatric emergency services from Alexandra Hospital to Worcestershire, because I have raised the issue so many times in the House. Will she join me in calling on the
clinical commissioning group and the trust to speed up their plans to bring forward the GP-led urgent care centre? May we have a debate about the future of health services in Worcestershire?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a strong voice for her constituency, and I commend her for raising this matter in the Chamber. Local commissioners are currently reviewing the national guidance issued on urgent care centres, prior to commissioning a revised model for the Alexandra Hospital. I understand that they expect to implement the new service in the next 12 months as planned, and she might like to seek an opportunity to raise the matter directly with Health Ministers.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The “beast from the east” brought red danger weather warnings to life for the first time last week. I welcome the fact that organisations such as Renfrewshire Council, the local McDonald’s franchisee Peter O’Keefe, and, as of one hour ago, Swissport at Glasgow airport are paying their employees who were unable to travel to work. May we have a debate on employers’ responsibilities for the safety of their staff and in ensuring that no worker is left out of pocket during severe weather warnings?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating all those who put in extra effort to keep people safe and transport open. All key transport operators, including airports, local authorities, train operating companies, Highways England and Network Rail, have winter contingency plans, as I am sure that they do their equivalents in Scotland. We pay tribute to all those who put in extra work. It is for their employers to ensure that they take the right decisions in securing the right balance between keeping services open and protecting their employees at all times.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I still hear way too many stories from constituents who are in battle with landlords or house builders about the condition of their homes. May we have a debate on the review of the housing complaints system?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for an excellent question. It is vital that consumers have swift, effective routes through which to complain when things go wrong. People need to know where to go and to be clear about what they can expect. He is right that existing routes can be confusing, so I am sure that he is pleased, as I am, that on 18 February we published a consultation on strengthening consumer redress in the housing market. We are looking at options about how to ensure that people, whether tenants or owners, can have access to quick, easy and effective redress, including at whether a single housing ombudsman could simplify that access.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (Lib Dem): I would like to raise the issue of volunteer drivers who receive reimbursement for patient transport. The present UK taxation rules hit those with high mileage very hard indeed. In my constituency, people have to travel huge distances—well over 200 miles—to get a patient to hospital and back again. Does the Leader of the House agree it would be helpful to have a debate on this issue in this Chamber?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very particular issue, which I can well understand is a real concern to his constituents and others where there are long distances to travel. I suggest that he raises the subject in an Adjournment debate so that he can hear directly from a Minister what they can do for those who have to travel particularly long distances.

Mr Speaker: Very good idea.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): May we have a debate on local businesses that are also global brands? That would allow me to highlight the fantastic Walkers Shortbread company, which has been subjected to unacceptable and despicable abuse this week from nationalists in Scotland because just one of its many products features a Union Jack. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should condemn those attacks and instead celebrate the success of Walkers Shortbread, which has been established in Moray for 120 years, employs hundreds of local people and is a great credit to our area?

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, my hon. Friend raises a very significant issue for his constituency. He is a great champion for Moray. I absolutely agree that Walkers Shortbread is delicious. It is a vital UK brand and a fabulous Scottish brand. Many of its tins are marked with “I love Scotland”, while others, very often for export, are marked with the Union Jack. It is a fabulous export and a delicious snack. It should be eaten in moderation—we do not want to encourage the overeating of shortbread or any other sugary product—but nevertheless we love Walkers. It is a great UK and Scottish product.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Leader of the House was quite right to say, in her answers to my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) and the shadow Leader of the House, that the threat by the US Administration to put huge tariffs on steel is a moving issue, but the very fact that it is a moving issue underlines the need for a statement in this House on what the Government are doing. When will we have a statement on that, and when will the official Opposition be again granted an Opposition day debate?

Andrea Leadsom: I think that I have said as much as I can about the Prime Minister’s determination to protect UK interests. She has made her views very clear to President Trump. As I have already mentioned, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade has raised the matter with US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, and overnight, the White House has indicated that there may be exemptions from tariffs for allies of the United States. It is very important that we continue to work to look after global trade. As we leave the EU, the United Kingdom wishes to be a world leader in promoting free trade around the globe, so that is what we will be doing. In terms of Opposition days, as I mentioned to the shadow Leader of the House, they will be brought forward in the usual way.
Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): European Union structural and social funds have benefited local authorities across the United Kingdom. May I request from the Leader of the House some parliamentary time to debate what will replace those funds post Brexit?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise this matter. He will be pleased that we have committed to replacing European structural funds with the UK shared prosperity fund after we leave the European Union. The new fund will be designed to raise productivity and reduce inequalities between communities across all four nations of the Union. We will consult on that later in the year.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Every year, 20,000 elephants are slaughtered simply for their ivory. When can we have a debate about the results of the consultation that finished a couple of months ago on the Government’s plans to ban the sale of ivory as soon as possible?

Andrea Leadsom: I am so glad that the hon. Gentleman raises this issue because it is absolutely vital that the UK continues to be at the forefront of clamping down on the illegal wildlife trade and, in particular, the poaching of ivory. When I was Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I was very proud to be progressing that consultation, which is now completed, as he points out. It received more than 70,000 consultation responses—one of the largest numbers in the Department’s history—and it is quite clear that an overwhelming majority support a ban. We will have a conference on the illegal wildlife trade later this year, and I absolutely assure him that we will do everything that we can to bring forward legislation as soon as possible.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, Babcock announced that 500 defence jobs would be lost at Devonport dockyard. With the uncertainty about the possible cuts to our amphibious warships and the Royal Marines, and the sale of HMS Ocean to Brazil, may we have a statement from the trade unions is nevertheless under way, and is expected to conclude in mid April. In the meantime, the Government are closely monitoring the situation, and the Department for Work and Pensions is on stand-by to provide support for those affected via Jobcentre Plus’s rapid response service.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): May I also wish a happy birthday to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and thank him for his kind words? I am sure that the House will join me in wishing the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) a happy birthday tomorrow. I was her age once, but I must admit that I do not remember it—it is too long ago.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): You are like fine wine, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the House will join me in wishing the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) a happy birthday. I am sure that he will celebrate with a slice of shortbread or two.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I, too, wish my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) a happy birthday. I am sure that he will be celebrating with a slice of shortbread or two.

Pete Wishart: British shortbread.

Patrick Grady: Chlorinated shortbread, from the United States.

May we have a debate on the relationship between personal independence payment reviews and the Motability scheme? I have a constituent who faces losing her car for the second time while she waits for her PIP appeal to
be heard. When will a Minister come to the House and explain why the system punishes people and takes away their cars even before their appeals have been heard?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important and worrying constituency issue. As I always say, if he wants to raise it with me in writing, I can take it up with the Department on his behalf. In the more general context of policy, however, I can tell him that we spend more than £50 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and those with health conditions. We are trying to enable more disabled people to work, and we are seeing a significant increase in the number of people who are able to get away from their disabilities and into work, which is a great way into a more productive and enjoyable life. That is the policy that the Government are trying to pursue, but if the hon. Gentleman has particular concerns, I shall be happy to take them up on his behalf.

Salisbury Incident

11.37 am

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement on the incident in Salisbury that has been unfolding over the past four days.

Let me first pay tribute to the continued professionalism, dedication and courage of the emergency services. They have handled the incident with their customary attentiveness, alacrity, and sense of public duty. First responders put themselves in dangerous situations on a day-to-day basis, and this incident has underlined that fact—to which, sadly, I shall return later in my statement.

I shall now update the House as far as is possible on the basis of the current facts of the case. At approximately 4.15 on Sunday afternoon, Wiltshire police received a call from a member of the public who was concerned for the welfare of two people in a park in Salisbury. Emergency services were called, and the two were admitted to the A&E department of Salisbury District Hospital. They were a man in his 60s and a woman in her 30s, with no visible signs of injury. They are understood to be Sergei and Yulia Skripal. Both remain unconscious, and in a critical but stable condition.

I regret to inform the House that a police officer has also fallen seriously ill. The officer was one of the first responders on Sunday, acting selflessly to help others. The latest update from the hospital is that the officer’s condition remains serious but stable, and that he is conscious, talking and engaging. Officers from Wiltshire police are providing support for the officer’s family and colleagues. Our thoughts are with all three victims, and their families and friends, at what will be an incredibly difficult time for them.

Wiltshire police began an investigation on Sunday to determine how the individuals had fallen ill, and whether a crime had been committed. They declared a major incident on Monday. On Tuesday the Metropolitan police decided that, given the unusual circumstances, responsibility for the investigation should be transferred to the National Counter Terrorism Policing Network. Samples from the victims have been tested by experts at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down, who are world-renowned experts in the field. As Assistant Commissioner Mark Rowley announced yesterday, that forensic analysis has revealed the presence of a nerve agent, and the incident is therefore being treated as attempted murder. I can confirm that it is highly likely the police officer has been exposed to the same nerve agent.

I spoke only this morning with Assistant Commissioner Mark Rowley, and he confirmed that we remain in the midst of a fast-paced, criminal investigation. As such, I will not comment further on the nature of the nerve agent. We must give the police the space they need to conduct a thorough investigation. All Members will recognise that an investigation such as this will be complex and may take some time.

Public safety continues to be the No.1 priority for this Government. Professor Sally Davies, the chief medical officer, stated yesterday that, based on the evidence we have, there is a low risk to the public. The UK has a world-leading emergency response. It is regularly tested and exercised to ensure we can deliver an effective
response to a wide range of chemical, biological and radiological incidents. The three emergency services are well supplied with state-of-the-art equipment to respond to such threats.

The frontline response is supported by world-class scientific research and advice. This ensures that decision making on the ground, by all agencies involved, is firmly based on the available evidence. This will also support the decontamination activity needed to return the location to normality.

The police are working closely with Public Health England, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the DSTL. They have cordoned off all known sites in Salisbury that were visited by the two initial victims before they became unwell, and are taking the necessary measures to protect public safety.

I want now to turn to the speculation—of which there has been much—around who was responsible for this most outrageous crime. The use of a nerve agent on UK soil is a brazen and reckless act. This was attempted murder in the most cruel and public way. People are right to want to know who to hold to account. But, if we are to be rigorous in this investigation, we must avoid speculation and allow the police to carry on their investigation.

As the assistant commissioner said yesterday, the investigation now involves hundreds of officers, following every possible lead to find those responsible. Some of those leads have come from members of the public. I would like to thank the people of Salisbury for their help and for the calm they have shown over the last four days. I encourage anyone who visited Salisbury town centre and surrounding areas on Sunday afternoon, who has not yet spoken to the police, to get in touch.

We are committed to doing all we can to bring the perpetrators to justice—whatever they are, and wherever they may be. The investigation is moving at pace, and this Government will act without hesitation as the facts become clearer. As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made clear on Tuesday, we will respond in a robust and appropriate manner once we ascertain who was responsible.

I would like to close where I began, by expressing my sincere thanks to the emergency services and hospital staff for their tireless efforts over the last four days. They have acted with utter professionalism both to minimise the risk to the wider public and to care for the victims of the attack, for which I know we are all very grateful. Our thoughts will be with the victims and their families over the coming days.

Finally, I thank Members for their understanding that there will clearly be limits on what we can say as this investigation continues. As and when information can be made public, it will be. I commend the statement to the House.

11.44 am

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement. May I start by paying tribute to the courage and dedication of the emergency services that responded to this horrendous incident? In particular, may I say that the thoughts of the whole House will be with the officer who has been hospitalised following this attack? I also pay tribute to the people of Salisbury. Can the Home Secretary confirm that the great cathedral city of Salisbury remains open for business?

The apparent poisoning of Yulia and Sergei Skripal and the police officer who suffered serious injury must of course be fully and completely investigated. I wholeheartedly concur with the Secretary of State that the investigation should be allowed to take place free from speculation, conjecture or interference. At best, these can be a distraction: at worst, they can hamper the investigatory efforts. Hon. Members and right hon. Members should be equally cautious and guarded in their comments. Idle or ill-informed speculation is not helpful. Can the Home Secretary assure the House that all the necessary resources are being made available to the investigation? Clearly, it is vital that there should be no speculation about the conclusions of the investigation, and that it is allowed to take its course, but will she ensure that she continues to keep the House updated?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), the shadow Foreign Secretary, asked the Foreign Secretary on Tuesday about the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill. Is the Home Secretary satisfied that the Government have all the necessary sanctions available to them? A number of proposals are currently being debated in Committee. Will she look at them again to ensure that we have the necessary tools?

This case raises broader and extremely important issues. These include how we prioritise the fight against crime and terrorist crime in this country. There is, after all, no greater priority for the state than to secure the safety of all those who are resident here. Today is not the day for discussion of those priorities, or divisions over them, in the fight against crime and terrorism, or for a discussion on budgets and how they are allocated. We will return to those matters at another opportunity. For now, let us be clear that we on the Labour Benches are appalled at the idea that anyone might be poisoned on the streets of our towns and cities, and we offer our full support to those seeking to investigate the matter.

We commend the professionalism, dedication and bravery of the emergency services, and we share the Government’s determination that this case should be brought to a speedy and just conclusion, and that similar incidents should be prevented in the future.

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his carefully thought-out and considerate comments. I am delighted to hear such unity of purpose across the House on this matter. He referred to the great cathedral city of Salisbury, and I share his views on that city and on the people of Salisbury, who have reacted so well. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), who is with me here on the Front Bench, for his consideration and support over the past four days.

Yes, I can reassure the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and the House that the police and the emergency services have the necessary resources. That is always one of my first questions, and they have been reassuring on that matter. On his point about keeping the House updated, of course I will do that. I thank him for his consideration and understanding that there might be limits to that, but when I can, I will of
course take the opportunity to come here to discuss the matter with the House. Partly because of the severity of the situation, I recognise the need to do that whenever possible. Members are rightly keen to find out what is happening.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill. We are of course engaging with the Members of Parliament who are proposing additional amendments. There have already been amendments to the Criminal Finances Act 2017 that reflect the sorts of initiatives he is asking for. There are additional proposals relating to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, and we will be considering them carefully.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The circumstantial evidence against Russia is strong—who else would have the motive and the means?—and I will put the same question to the Home Secretary that I put to the Foreign Secretary earlier this week. Those of us who seek to understand Russia know that the only way to preserve peace is through strength. If Russia is behind this, it is a brazen act of war and humiliates our country. I echo the remarks of the junior Defence Minister last week: defence is the first duty of the realm and spending 2% on defence is now not enough.

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. My first concern must be the incident in hand and the safety of the people in the area around the incident. There will come a time for attribution, and there will be further consequences and further information to follow. Now, however, I am concerned about the incident and its consequences.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement. The circumstances surrounding these attacks are extremely worrying, particularly the fact that they constitute a potentially serious threat to public safety—although I am relieved to note that the chief medical officer considers there to be a low risk to public safety now. The emergency services have done a fantastic job, putting their safety on the line to ensure that Mr Skripal and his daughter were stabilised as soon as possible. We are pleased to hear that the police officer’s condition has improved and that he is now able to communicate. Our thoughts are with his and Mr Skripal and his daughter’s family and friends at this time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) put questions to the Foreign Secretary on Tuesday that I want to put to the Home Secretary today. How do we protect human assets such as Mr Skripal in this country? Will this type of scenario lead to a review of how we best protect such people across the United Kingdom? Considering Mr Skripal’s background, he was at high risk of being the victim of an attempted assassination, so does the Home Secretary know how the planning of such an attack was able to slip through the net of the UK intelligence services? What steps is she taking to ensure that those who are at risk living in the UK are properly protected?

Earlier this week, the Foreign Secretary stated that the Government would respond appropriately should evidence emerge that implies state responsibility. Will the Home Secretary therefore confirm that she has had, and is continuing to have, discussions with her counterparts from across Europe and further afield to get to the bottom of the matter? Reports that as many as 14 deaths on UK soil could have occurred in similar circumstances is very worrying. Will there be an inquiry into those incidents and the frequency of such attacks?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for her support for the general tone of the Government’s approach, and I of course join in her admiration and support for the emergency services, which are doing such excellent work. I must repeat to the hon. Lady that the investigation is ongoing at pace, and the police and the other services involved appreciate the urgency. It does not help their work, which must be our priority, to speculate about what might happen when we make an attribution. When we are ready to bring more evidence to the House, I reassure the hon. Lady that I hope to be able to go further in answering her questions. For now, she must allow me to say that we will not be drawn any further as we allow the investigation to complete.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Whoever the culprit, it is just as well that we are currently reviewing our defence capabilities, so that we can increase them—can’t we?

Amber Rudd: As far as our security at home is concerned, I reassure my right hon. Friend that we have already put in substantial extra funds. The security services are recruiting 1,900 new people between now and 2020, and I am reassured by them that that recruitment is proceeding at pace and with success.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I join the Home Secretary in paying tribute to our remarkable emergency services, which have responded with such professionalism to this awful attack. All our thoughts will be with the brave police officer and with Sergei and Yulia Skripal.

I have written to the Home Secretary to ask for a review of 14 other cases, and she will know that there are many ways in which that could happen and precedents for doing so. As for the immediate investigation, has she had any circumstantial evidence that implies state responsibility? Will she assure the House that all appropriate support will be made available, not just for the police officers, but for any witnesses who might come forward?

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I share the sentiments of my right hon. Friend about the bravery of our police officers and the people in Salisbury who witnessed this terrible tragedy; it was an awful thing for them to have to see in their town. Will she assure the House that all appropriate support will be made available, not just for the police officers, but for any witnesses who might come forward?
Amber Rudd: Yes. That is a very good point. Quite a number of individuals in Salisbury have been concerned about their health, and have wanted to report concerns about the incident. They have been coming forward and receiving the appropriate treatment and support.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I commend the Home Secretary on her statement, and on the calm and cool way that she has approached the immediate response to the incident. She will be aware, however, that many Members on both sides of this House have for several years warned of the growing threat of the terrorist Russian state under President Putin, whether we are talking about money laundering in the City of London, the targeted murders that my right hon. Friend, the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) spoke about, or interference in our political and democratic system. Will the Home Secretary please assure the House that when this immediate crisis is over, she will work with other Secretaries of State in a joined-up way across Government not only to listen to concerns, but to take meaningful action to tackle this threat?

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. I reassure him that this Government have not been asleep at the switch, in terms of where our international enemies are. He refers to Russia. Separately from this incident, we have been very clear about our disagreements with Russia, particularly on Ukraine and Syria, and we have been outspoken in our criticism and our determination to take action—hence the amendment to the Criminal Finances Bill, and the considered amendments to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill. We will go further, should there be need to do so.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. Will she reassure the public that our renowned, world-leading facilities at Porton Down, where amazing scientific work is done, have the resources and capability to continue with the work that they have rightly been doing? They have been getting good results in the last few days.

Amber Rudd: Yes, and I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to do exactly that: reassure the public that our facilities, support, scientists and expertise at Porton Down are world-class. I hope that gives the public, and her, the comfort that they need.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement, and the calm leadership that she is showing on this issue. I associate myself and my party with her comments on our amazing emergency services, and pass on our thoughts to the victims.

Following on from the questions from the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), whether or not Russian agents are shown to be responsible for this incident, is it not time that we got more realistic about Russia? Will the Home Secretary confirm whether the memorandum of understanding between the UK and Rosatom—the Russian nuclear power company so strongly championed by the former Prime Minister, Mr Cameron—has formally ended? She may not know that today, but will she write to me when she finds that out? If it has not been ended, will she make sure that it is ended, so that the love-in with Russia that we saw a few years ago is completely finished?

Amber Rudd: I cautiously welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s comments. I do not recognise his description of our relationship with Russia over the past few years, but I will indeed write to him on the matter that he raises.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for her approach. Clearly, Members across the House will be calling for investigation of unexplained deaths that may be connected to this incident. Equally, a number of individuals out there will fear for their life as a result of their activities with Russia and other such countries. Will my right hon. Friend undertake to review the security arrangements for those brave individuals, so that they can live their life in this country in the way that they have chosen to, in a free society?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend makes a good point. In this country, we want to make sure everybody is protected and everybody is free, in a free society, as he rightly says, to go about their family life and their work life. He makes a particular point about keeping a certain group of people safe. I gently say to him that that is a matter for the police and the other services, but I am confident that they know what they are doing and we will keep that in hand.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I join all those in the Chamber, including the Home Secretary and Opposition Front Benchers, who have praised the emergency workers and hospital staff. My thoughts and condolences are with the families involved.

The Home Secretary has made a commitment to ensure that the safety of those at risk is looked at again and reviewed once this investigation is completed and we know exactly what has happened. Will she commit to ensuring that the police have the resources necessary to properly implement any improved security procedures once this investigation is out of the way and we know what we need to do?

Amber Rudd: We always make sure the police have the resources they need to keep this country safe. On this particular incident, on this attack, I have made it absolutely clear to the police and the emergency services that they have our entire support to do whatever is necessary to get to the bottom of this investigation. I understand the hon. Lady’s willingness to raise the issue of resources, but I reassure her, this House and this country that the police have the resources they need and are full tilt on this investigation.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I wish to add my tribute to the Wiltshire police force. My best friend from school serves in that force, and I know how dedicated he and his colleagues are to the security of the county. How are Wiltshire police working with national teams collaboratively to progress this investigation? What lessons will be shared with police forces throughout the UK?
Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his support in this important incident, on which it is very important to see local leadership as well from Members of Parliament. I reassure him that the local police and the national police are working well together. I spoke this morning to Mark Rowley, the deputy commissioner who is in charge of counter-terrorism, and he has of course been in regular contact with the commissioner who is in charge of counter-terrorism, police and the national police are working well together. Members of Parliament. I reassure him that the local it is very important to see local leadership as well from

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I commend the Home Secretary and the Opposition spokesman for the calm but clear statements they gave. No Member of this House would seek to compromise an ongoing criminal investigation by speculation about motives or perpetrators. However, given the circumstances and the huge level of public concern, will she consider the request made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) to review the 14 cases to which my right hon. Friend referred?

Amber Rudd: I repeat to the hon. Gentleman that that is a series of rumours and speculations, and it is for the police to decide what to investigate. I understand that it is reasonable to want to raise it at this moment, but our focus must be on the serious event that has taken place over the past four days. Now is not a time to follow up on some other allegations.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I add my voice to those that have congratulated our emergency services and the Home Secretary on the way she is handling this serious event. Following the call from the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) to examine other unexplained deaths, the Home Secretary will be aware that this is not just confined to this country but can be seen in the international arena. Perhaps it is not the time right now, but will she assure the House that she will work internationally, so that when we find out “who”, “how” and “when”, we will be able to hold those people to account, even in the international arena? Will she join me in regretting the fact that Russia is disengaged from the Council of Europe, and therefore the European Court of Human Rights, which is not a good signal for good international relations?

Amber Rudd: I share my right hon. Friend’s disappointment with that situation. Russia plays a role internationally, although the Prime Minister has been very clear, calling this out at her Mansion House speech in 2017, that she has concerns about its behaviour. Russia does have a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, and we do engage with the Russians up to a point, but there is no “business as usual” here. We need to make sure that we are very clear-eyed about their role and their intentions, so I do join my right hon. Friend in that matter, and I hope we will be able to work internationally should the situation arise and this be needed.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. Has it been necessary to issue revised guidance to frontline police officers on what to do if they are concerned that such circumstances might arise again? If it has been revised, has she seen it, and is she satisfied with it?

Amber Rudd: As the hon. Lady will know, we have been operating at a “severe” terrorism level for a while now—five terrorist attacks got through last year, of course—and we did therefore review police guidelines on unusual substances last year, so I believe that the police have all the right information and tools available to them.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): This country is rightly praised around the world for the dedication of our police and our determination to follow proper process to ensure we come to the right conclusions before then acting with calm deliberation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that in these most awful and appalling of circumstances we need those attributes more than ever?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is the professional approach we need to take to this incident. We must support the police, who have such a strong and rightly earned reputation internationally, to make sure they have the space and time to make the inquiries, collect the evidence and then proceed.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Can the Home Secretary tell us more about the work of Wiltshire public health officials to keep local people safe?

Amber Rudd: The chief medical officer has told us, given the information we have now, that she thinks the threat to the public is low, which I know will reassure local health officials in Wiltshire.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I agree we should be cautious about attributing guilt at this stage, but does the Home Secretary share my and my constituents’ anger about the cruel nature of this crime, which could so easily have resulted in considerably greater collateral damage, and will she therefore assure me and my constituents that eventually the full force of the law will be brought down upon the perpetrators?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Just because we want to approach this with a cool head in order to collect the evidence, it does not mean we do not share the outrage that he and his constituents clearly feel. When we have the evidence, I will return to the House.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): As the proud husband of a serving police officer, I welcome the comments from the Home Secretary and Members across the House in support of the brave men and women in our emergency services. Should this not also serve to remind us, however, of the pressures on their families, who every day do not know when their loved ones leave for work what they will face?

Amber Rudd: That is such a good point. It is not just the individuals who are affected but their families, and I know that the thoughts of everybody in the House will go out not just to the victims but to the families around them, who must be having such a worried and anxious time right now.
Points of Order

12.8 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you advise me on the correct course of action when a private company gives commitments and assurances to Parliament and its Select Committees on issues that affect national security and public safety and then fails to meet them? There is widely available on YouTube this week a banned illegal propaganda video from the extremist proscribed organisation National Action, despite the fact that the Home Affairs Select Committee has raised this video with YouTube and Google seven times over the last 12 months, and despite the fact that they have promised us that the video is illegal and will be taken down and that they have the technology to prevent it from being put back up. Have you had any indication that the Government will look into this, Mr Speaker, and do you share my immense concern that one of the richest companies in the world is failing to meet its basic responsibilities to tackle extremism and protect public safety in this country?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her point of order and share her intense concern about the matter. As I am sure everybody in the House will agree, National Action is a despicable, fascist, neo-Nazi organisation. My understanding is that it was proscribed by the Home Secretary. If those commitments have been made by those companies, they must be honoured. The right hon. Lady suggested that commitments have been given by those companies, not merely to her as an individual, but to the Home Affairs Committee. If that is so and those commitments have not been honoured, it is open to the Committee, although it should not be necessary, to demand, as a matter of urgency, the appearance of representatives of one or more of those companies before it to explain themselves. This matter must be sorted sooner rather than later. My strong sense is that that would be the will of the House, but the will of the House can also be expressed, and the public order considerations can most appropriately be articulated, by the Home Secretary, who thankfully is in her place.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) is absolutely right to raise this issue. As you rightly said, Mr Speaker, National Action is a proscribed group—I proscribed it myself—and it is a terrorist organisation. The fact is that internet companies have made good progress in taking down Daesh-focused material. We have demonstrated that with our own system, which we showed them, they can take down 94% of material that goes up from Daesh-type terrorist organisations. We need to see much more effort put into the particular area of extreme right-wing groups, like the one the right hon. Lady has raised. We need to see more effort made using artificial intelligence. I hope that the right hon. Lady and I can work together to make sure that we hold internet companies more to account.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the Home Secretary. We would not want a situation to arise in which the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) felt it necessary to write to me to allege a contempt of the House, although that is of course a recourse open to her if people do not comply and honour their undertakings. We very much hope that that will happen very, very soon.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Today, there are reports in the media that one in 10 councils could follow Tory Northamptonshire into technical bankruptcy, according to the National Audit Office. The main causes are the relentless 50% cuts in central Government funding to councils and the increasing pressures on children’s and adults’ services, which have resulted in the cutting of other vital services, unsustainable one-off sales of assets and the use of reserves.

Given that this is the worst crisis to face local government in the sector’s 170-year history, and given that the Government are unwilling and unprepared to give time to the Opposition to debate matters such as this, has the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government given you, Sir, any indication that he will come to the House today to make a statement, so that Members can question his disastrous slash-and-burn strategy and the findings of this most devastating NAO report in the fullest manner possible?

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State has given me no such indication. I must say to the hon. Gentleman that the Secretary of State is a very willing fellow, but we would not in any way or case want to countenance the idea of him interfering with the time available for the debate on International Women’s Day. However, the hon. Gentleman has registered his concern, which will have been heard on the Treasury Bench.

I note what the hon. Gentleman said about the current absence of Opposition days, which would be a normal mechanism by which such matters could be aired. If the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues want such matters to be aired in the Chamber, he can rest assured that they will be aired. They can be aired on the terms of the Secretary of State, in the form of a statement, which it would be open to him to volunteer. If they are not aired in that way, they will be aired in another way.

**BILLS PRESENTED**

**House of Peers Bill**

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Christine Jardine, supported by Tom Brake, Tim Farron, Layla Moran, Jamie Stone, Wera Hobhouse, Jo Swinson, Sir Vince Cable and Norman Lamb, presented a Bill to provide for the renaming of the House of Lords as the House of Peers.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 June; and to be printed (Bill 179).*

**Forensic Science Regulator Bill**

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Green, supported by Vicky Ford, Damien Moore, Maggie Throup, Andrew Bowie, Mr William Wragg, Jack Brereton and Stephen Kerr, presented a Bill to make provision for the appointment of the Forensic Science Regulator; to make provision about the Regulator and about the regulation of forensic science; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March, and to be printed (Bill 180) with explanatory notes (Bill 180-EN).*
### Vote 100 and International Women's Day

12.14 pm

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Amber Rudd):

I beg to move,

That this House has considered Vote 100 and International Women's Day.

This House welcomes International Women's Day as an occasion to come together to celebrate the achievements of women, while also recognising the inequalities that still exist. Around the world, International Women's Day is being marked with arts performances, talks, rallies, conferences, marches and debates like this one. It is a great honour to lead today's debate.

This year, 2018, is a particularly significant year to be having this discussion in the UK, as we mark 100 years since some women won the right to vote after a long and arduous struggle. In 1919, Nancy Astor became the first woman to take her seat in this House. Can Members imagine walking into this Chamber as the lone woman among a crowd of men? It would not be until 1979 that we would get our first female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.

I am pleased to say that the Parliament that I joined in 2010 was a place very different from the Parliament of Nancy Astor's day. There were 142 other female MPs on these Benches, and we had a female Home Secretary—a trend that I am proud to continue. We now have a more diverse Parliament than ever, with 208 female MPs. A third of the Cabinet are now women and, of course, we also have our second female Prime Minister.

Nevertheless, getting women into Parliament is not simply about changing the faces on these Benches; at its heart, it is about how we use our positions here to make meaningful change to women's lives throughout the UK and the world, because from here we can bring about real change.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I join the Minister in welcoming International Women's Day. Does she also welcome the fact that the UN Commission on the Status of Women is meeting again in New York next week? Does she agree that it is really important that it comes up with strong policies so that women in rural communities are adequately supported?

Amber Rudd: I am delighted to agree with the hon. Lady about the importance of that meeting of the commission. Her emphasis on making sure that we get real policies for women in rural communities is essential.

I am proud to be part of a Government who are wholeheartedly committed to improving the lives of women and girls. Since 2010, we have made significant progress in accelerating gender equality at home and abroad, whether by empowering women in the workplace, tackling violence against women and girls or improving girls' education around the globe.

We all know, though, that there is more to do, with sexual harassment scandals, stories of debauched dinners, one third of women worldwide experiencing physical or sexual violence, and the fact that it will take an estimated 118 years to close the global gender pay gap. As the theme for this year's International Women's Day makes clear, we must continue to “press for progress”. This effort must span countries and continents, policy areas and political allegiances.

I wish to kick off today's debate by talking about three areas in which I think women are still losing out to men globally, and what we are going to do about it. The first is violence: too many women and girls face harm and abuse. The second is money: many women still earn less than their male counterparts. The third is influence: around the world, men still occupy the majority of the top jobs.

Let me start on the first point, violence. A truly equal society is one in which everyone is free from the threat of gendered violence. Today, I am proud to announce the launch of the Government’s consultation on tackling domestic abuse, which will help to inform the introduction of the domestic abuse Bill. Domestic abuse affects approximately 2 million people in England and Wales every year, and the majority of the victims are women. The Government are determined to do all we can to confront the devastating impact that such abuse has on victims and their families, and in doing so to address a key cause and consequence of gender inequality.

Our consultation seeks to transform our approach to domestic abuse, addressing the issue at every stage from prevention to early intervention to bringing more perpetrators to justice. It reinforces our determination to make domestic abuse everyone's business. This comprehensive consultation will last for 12 weeks, and I encourage every Member of the House to engage with it and share it with those in their networks who have, or who should have, an interest in this area. This is a critical opportunity to bring these crimes out of the shadows.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that, last week, the United Nations convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women said that the way we treat women in Northern Ireland, denying them access to abortion in their home nation, is a form of violence against women. Today, 135 parliamentarians from throughout the House have written to her asking her to commit to providing an opportunity to put that right in the legislation she is talking about. Will she give us a right to vote to give women in Northern Ireland equal access to abortion rights?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady will know about the limitations on my announcing any such statement, but may I nevertheless take the opportunity to thank her for the good work that she has done in this area, including in ensuring that, for the first time, the women of Northern Ireland have access to abortions? We now have a new system—a centralised system—for those women so that they find it much easier than ever before to access the health support that she, like me, thinks is so vital.

The consultation will last 12 weeks, and I urge every Member of the House to engage with it. Domestic violence is not the only type of violence that demands our urgent attention, though. Internationally, too, we must continue to combat violence against women and girls. Globally, one in three women are beaten or sexually abused in their lifetime. We are generating world-leading evidence through our £25 million “What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls” programme.
This year, results from 15 innovative interventions being evaluated across Africa and Asia will provide new global evidence about what works to stop violence before it starts. We want this evidence to be a game-changer in supporting more effective UK and international support for ending violence against women and girls globally, and it is essential that we put what we learn into practice.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I welcome the announcement that the Minister is making about the international dimension to protecting women against violence. Will she assure the House, as part of the consultation on tackling violence against women here at home, that refuges will be properly resourced? Many have closed down in recent years, including in my constituency. Women need proper support when they have to go to refuges because they face violence. Can she assure the House that she will make sure that happens?

Amber Rudd: Quite simply, I can assure the House that ensuring that women have the right support at refuges is an essential part of the support that we will provide women when they become victims of domestic abuse. I know that there are concerns in the sector about funding, and there is a consultation ongoing, but we will not oversee a reduction in beds. We are looking about funding, and there is a consultation ongoing, but it is essential that we put what we learn into practice.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Probably all of us in the House were shocked when we heard the reports of sexual harassment and abuse in the aid sector. When we are looking at what happens to women internationally, it is important that we hold our charitable organisations’ feet to the fire to tackle the abuse that has been reported. How does my right hon. Friend propose that we can ensure that those organisations will deal with the allegations of sexual exploitation in the aid sector?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend will have heard, as I did, the absolute conviction and determination of the Secretary of State for International Development to make sure that, as my right hon. Friend says, she holds the charitable sector’s feet to the fire. It is wholly unacceptable that anybody going abroad for a charity should take advantage of vulnerable girls and women. I am confident in the activity of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in this area.

The second area that I wish to discuss is money. A truly equal society is also one where women and men are equally economically empowered. Globally, women earn less than men, have fewer assets, and still do 60% to 80% of unpaid domestic work. One in 10 married women in developing countries are not consulted by their husbands on how their income is spent, and although in the UK we are enjoying record female employment, we are also grappling with a national gender pay gap of 18%. Therefore, although as women we might think we have equality in the workplace, our pay cheques tell a different story. That is why this Government have introduced world-leading legislation.
know that there has been quite a lot of reporting on substantial banking and media companies, which has shown the scale of the gender pay gap. Managing directors and senior directors are having to take action as a result, which is very welcome.

I am pleased to support the Hampton-Alexander review’s targets of achieving 33% of women on boards and 33% in executive committees. It is not just about getting in; it is about getting on, and women deserve to get to the top of all the professions and to get as far as their aspirations will take them.

I end by reminding the House of the aspirations of Emmeline Pankhurst, who famously said of the campaign for suffrage that the suffragettes had to “make more noise than anybody else” for their cause to be heard and to enact the change that they wanted. Man or woman, we must continue the legacy of the suffragettes, suffragists and their supporters. We must make enough noise so that the agenda that I have talked about continues to be realised. This is an important debate, and I urge everyone here to continue to “press for progress”, as the International Women’s Day slogan suggests, to finally achieve the true gender equality for which women have been fighting for so long.

12.30 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I am so pleased that we are making time available today to continue the important tradition of marking International Women’s Day. I thank Mr Speaker, because he has done it again—he has made history. He helped me to raise the International Women’s Day flag over the Parliament buildings for the first time in history, and for that, I salute him.

This year’s International Women’s Day has been a bit of a rollercoaster of emotions for me. Reading about the struggle that led to some women gaining the right to vote, to “press for progress”, as the International Women’s Day slogan suggests, to finally achieve the true gender equality for which women have been fighting for so long.

There is little doubt that 2018 is turning out to be a landmark year for women. The decades of campaigning that led to women’s suffrage a century ago highlights how far we have come, but also just how far we still have to go. It led me to reflect on the persistent inequalities that relate to class and ethnicity, as well as to gender. Working-class men were denied the vote until 1918, and their disfranchisement paved the way for working-class women. But our demand for equality goes beyond the vote, vital though it is. We are interested in the advancement of equality, on a broad front, and we cannot ignore the fact that class and race often go hand in hand in the struggle for equality.

There is little doubt that 2018 is turning out to be a landmark year for women. The decades of campaigning that led to women’s suffrage a century ago highlights what women can achieve when we unite and organise. If all women had been granted the vote in 1918, we would have been the majority, but it was another 10 years before full electoral equality for women was enshrined in the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928. That legislation was the result of decades of struggle by famous and not-so-famous people.

I remember hearing the saying, “If you hold the pen, you write the history.” That is hard to understand until we start reading history and realise that there are bits missing. My theme today is taken from the writer Virginia Woolf, who said that for most of history, Anonymous was a woman. At the march on Sunday, I was asked who I was marching for. I said that I was marching for the hidden history of women—for the women whose campaigning zeal did not make them famous, and for the women who suffered, and still suffer, in silence.

The role of women of colour in the suffragette movement has often been overlooked. I am so grateful to the Commons Library for unearthing the case of Sarah Parker Remond, the only known woman of colour to have signed the first petition for women’s suffrage in 1866. She was a prominent African American lecturer, abolitionist and agent of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Sarah was an educated, independent woman of wealth. Why would she be hidden from the history of the suffragette movement? There can only really be one answer: the colour of her skin. Today, I salute Sarah Parker Remond in Parliament so that her name will live on in perpetuity in Hansard. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Thank you.

A better-known woman of colour and suffragette is Sophia Duleep Singh. She is rightly celebrated even though she was born after the original suffrage petition. She campaigned for women nationally as well as locally. She has been the subject of a BBC documentary and a Royal Mail commemorative stamp. I treasure the photograph of me with a poster-sized version of that stamp—a small one would not have been very good, would it? The part played by the vast majority of black, Asian and minority ethnic women in the suffrage movement has been lost. They are basically a hidden history—a story that might never be told.

I am proud of the Opposition’s 50:50 shadow Cabinet, and I am truly proud of the fact that 45% of Labour MPs are women. One more heave, and we will have parity. All we need is a general election in the next couple of months. It is also notable that across the House, the number of women MPs is at a record high of 32%. We welcome women MPs from all parties in this place. If we could clap, I would say that we should give ourselves a round of applause—but not too loudly, because we still have persistent problems that will not go away unless we take a radical approach. We should applaud the Conservatives for electing a woman leader—

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Twice.

Dawn Butler: Twice, as the hon. Gentleman says. We should, however, note that for eight years the right hon. Lady has sat at the table of a Cabinet that has sanctioned £80 billion of tax and benefit changes, as a result of which more than 86% of cuts fall on the shoulders of women. So I say this: a round of applause, but not too loudly.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her speech and the way in which she is reflecting on International Women’s Day. Will she join me in recognising the fact that for the past 66 years we have had a female Head of State? Will she send congratulations to Her Majesty the Queen, who has presided so well over this country through smooth times and rough?

Dawn Butler: I will congratulate the Queen on the dignity and poise with which she has held her position over the years. I hope that we might see the new generation coming in and taking that place in the future. [Interruption.] Long may she reign—absolutely. We do not want to see
the end of her reign, but I understand that she is scaling back her duties to make way for the next generation. I am in no way advocating her quick demise.

Let me offer a cautionary tale from 100 years ago. Just as women were getting the vote, male misogyny struck a blow at women’s sport. Teams of women were playing football in front of large crowds and making big money, but the Football Association banned women from its grounds. The FA said that “the game of football”—this was probably said in a more pompous voice—“is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged.” At a stroke, the FA destroyed women’s football. I bet that if Eniola Aluko is watching, she is probably thinking that not much has changed.

Women football players have been making up for lost time, however. Sadly, the England team lost narrowly last night to the world champions, the United States, but I wish them well on their continued journey. I would like to acknowledge the first real international women’s football star, Michelle Akers. In the 1991 women’s world championship, she was the winner of the golden boot, and she even appeared on a cereal box.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I want to highlight the work that Lewes football club does in the world of women’s football. It was the first club in this country to give equal pay to the men’s and women’s teams.

Dawn Butler: That is excellent news, and I hope that it will be reflected nationally as we encourage the game of women’s football. I would also like to note Briana Scurry, a goalkeeper who was the first black woman to be elected to the US hall of fame.

As women, we know that we have to break down structural barriers, but sometimes we forget just how deep the roots of those structural barriers are. We have to break down centuries-old traditions to get into places such as Parliament, which were designed to keep us out. Today, too many groups still face discrimination and disadvantage. We must look forward and tackle the structural barriers facing all women and those with protected characteristics so that we can achieve true equality for all.

The official theme of International Women’s Day is “Press for Progress”. I want to set out Labour’s priorities in the areas where the need for change is most pressing. There is a long list, and it includes tackling violence against women and girls, tackling domestic violence and abuse in the workplace, and, of course, tackling the enduring gender pay gap. I am proud of the role that Labour has played in ensuring progress in the UK by breaking down structural barriers that have long held women back. Labour brought in the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Equality Act 2010. We introduced the minimum wage and Sure Start. We extended maternity leave and doubled maternity pay, thus valuing women.

Now, Labour believes that we will make a real difference in closing the gender pay gap only with a combination of sticks and carrots. We will mandate all companies with over 250 employees to produce action plans to close the gender pay gap. Companies would be accredited for their progress and issued with certification, and only companies with certification would be able to bid for lucrative Government contracts. This is a win-win situation—it is the right thing to do. The workforce will be loyal, and companies will make more profit, as the Minister mentioned, and will be rewarded for good practice. We will also benefit as a country. According to a study by PwC, the closure of the gender pay gap would give a £90 billion boost to the UK. Globally, the boost would be trillions of dollars—trillions! In the developing world, it is widely recognised that empowering women is an important step in driving economic growth, and that should be part of our sustainable development goals.

Between 2015 and 2016, the UK fell from 14th to 15th place in a ranking of 33 OECD countries based on five key indicators of female economic empowerment. Our country deserves better. Our country needs a Labour Government and our policies to put people and progress at the heart—

Maria Caulfield: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. This policy, whether introduced by a male or a female, is important to address pay inequality for women and to ensure that the gender pay gap is not just audited but closed. That is the important factor.

The near parity between women and men in the parliamentary Labour party has not come about by chance. The introduction of all-women shortlists promoted a change of culture. When the election was called at short notice and we had no time for all-women shortlists, we still selected and elected more women than any other party.

The test for any party is, “Are you helping or hindering?” I am afraid that many current Government policies fail that test. We in the Labour party are determined that we will be a help, not a hindrance, to women. I do not have time to go into all the elements of our key policy strands, but they form an acronym—AHELP. That covers access to justice; health and wellbeing; economic equality; leadership and representation; and protections for women. With this, we will see a real transformation.

Women make up 51% of the population, and without that 51%, the other 49% would not be here. So let this be the year that change happens. I will not wait another 110 years for real equality.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): This is the first time in many years that the International Women’s Day debate has been held in Government time. I thank those on the Front Bench who made that happen—we know who they are—and hope that this is a trend for the future as well.

Today is a very special day indeed: International Women’s Day in the year that we celebrate 100 years since women first won not only the right to vote, but the right to stand for election to this place. It has also been,
for a long time, a day of celebration in my household, because today is my youngest son James's 16th birthday. I think there might be other Members on the Front Bench who also have children who were born on International Women's Day. This is a day when men and women can and should come together to celebrate, whether it is for their children or for other reasons.

Equality affects us all, and persistent inequality disadvantages us all. That is why, in the work of the Women and Equalities Committee, we look at all strands of equality. We have a particular interest in women's equality, but we are not frightened to look at the issues that face men too. Our latest inquiry has been into dads in the workplace. I thank all my colleagues who are here today—the hon. Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), and others who serve on the Committee—for their dedication to the work of the inquiry. We will be publishing the final report in the next two weeks.

The Government have, as outlined by the Minister, shown their huge commitment to gender equality in this country, but also abroad. Today's announcement on the proposed tough new laws on domestic abuse indicates that that commitment is showing no sign of diminishing. The Government's record needs to be put on record, because it is so striking: the criminalisation of forced marriage, two new stalking laws, the roll-out of domestic violence protection orders, new offences on domestic abuse relating to coercive control, shared parental leave, equal marriage, making revenge pornography a crime, and making sex and relationship education compulsory for all children. All those things show that the Government understand the very wide nature of the policies that they need to put in place to address equality issues for women.

Today's theme is about pressing for change. The role of the Women and Equalities Committee, which I chair, is to make sure that we continue to hold the Government's feet to the fire, not just on their existing legislative work but on that for the future. I will talk about three areas of our work in the Committee that I gently suggest require further work in future. Maternity discrimination, despite its strength, and a clear determination by the Government to outlaw it, continues to blight the lives of too many women. The use of non-disclosure agreements in many of the arrangements that are put forward to encourage women to leave the workplace means that it is difficult for us to see the full scale of the problem. That is why the Committee will be looking carefully at how we should reform non-disclosure agreements for issues not just like sexual harassment, but maternity discrimination as well.

Another area that I am sure the Committee will want to continue to scrutinise is the role of women in this place. We produced a very important report shortly before the last general election calling for the implementation of aspects of the Equality Act to make it transparent how many women are standing for election at various points in the parliamentary calendar. It was disappointing that the Government did not agree to go forward with the part of the Act that would require all political parties to be transparent about the data on their gender split of candidates at that time. I hope that I can encourage those on the Front Bench to continue to look at how we might be able to use that legislation to throw transparency on to this issue.

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As our previous leader David Cameron said, sunlight is the best disinfectant, and that is still the case today, particularly when it comes to the work of parties in the selection of their candidates. While there may be more women sitting on the Labour Benches today than on the Conservative Benches, I am sure they would agree that the selection procedure can stand in the way of women coming into this place. We need to ensure there is transparency of the data.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: I praise the work that my right hon. Friend does as Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee. I loved the list she gave of what we have done in government; that is an important message, because both parties have something to contribute. Does she agree that we must put forward a very positive view of women's role in this House? The most important thing is to encourage young women to look at being an MP as a potential career. If we are always complaining and pointing out the downsides of this job, that will not be very encouraging. I encourage her Committee to look at those positives, so that young women know that this could be a job for them, and that it is one of the most fantastic jobs they could ever do.

Mrs Miller: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The best thing that we are doing at the moment to encourage young women to be interested in politics is having a female Prime Minister. It was when I saw Margaret Thatcher become leader of the party and then Prime Minister of our country that politics became relevant for me. It turned politics from, frankly, a lot of old men in grey raincoats to something technicolour and relevant to me as a 14-year-old girl living in south Wales, where there were not too many Tories around. I could see an amazing role model on the television who was not only a fantastic female politician but was turning our country round from the crisis of the '70s, when we were—

Dame Cheryl Gillan: The sick man of Europe.

Mrs Miller: Indeed.

Seema Malhotra: Does the right hon. Lady agree with me about the value of teachers and the role they can play in encouraging young girls to come forward? I want to tell a slightly different story that I have not often shared. One of the reasons I got involved in politics was that, for our homework one day at school, we were asked to go and work ourselves up about something, and I managed to work myself up about Margaret Thatcher. I can honestly say that the rest is history.

I want to acknowledge the work done by teachers in my schools, such as Cranford school, which has started Cranford Parliament and will be holding International Women's Day events today and tomorrow. Those initiatives have an impact by making people feel involved in political debate and are important in connecting Parliament with education.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Inspiring people to get involved in politics is such an important part of our job.
I want to talk about inspiring women. I might have been the first woman to be elected to Parliament in North Hampshire, but I am now joined by five other female Conservative Members of Parliament in Hampshire, including my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies). Where one woman treads, others will follow. I am very proud indeed that 60% of my borough councillors in Basingstoke are female, led by the incredibly impressive Councillor Terri Reid. It is important to recognise that as Members of Parliament, we can inspire others to become involved in politics through our work.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): On that point about inspiring women, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that as Members of Parliament, we get into our schools to speak to young women and show them that being an MP is exactly the sort of job they should be aspiring to do, as is being the leader of a company? As a male MP with two female bosses, I know that women are at least as good at this job and probably better. Does she agree that a woman’s place is not, as some old-fashioned people might say, in the kitchen, but on the Front Bench?

Mrs Miller: What we are trying to say is that a woman’s place is in the House, which is a similar thing. I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. He is absolutely right that we need to recognise the importance of encouraging more young women into politics.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is important that we in this House take responsibility for inspiring other women, including our daughters, but we should also remember on this day that many of us owe our inspiration to our mothers, our grandmothers and important women in our lives. My own grandmother did not have the right to vote when she was born. I wear her wedding ring to this Chamber every day, and occasionally it serves as a reminder of what we owe to generations past.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady makes such a poignant point, and I am sure all of us will reflect on the role of women in our own families in getting us here today.

There are other women in our communities whom we need to celebrate. We are incredibly privileged in Hampshire to have one of only four female chief constables in the country, Olivia Pinkney, who is doing an incredible job of running one of the largest police forces in the country. The chief executive of my local hospital in Basingstoke, Alex Whitfield, succeeded another female chief executive, to make sure we have some of the best health services in the area.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The right hon. Lady is right to point out the need to have more women in senior policing positions and to encourage more women police officers to rise up through the ranks. Will she join me in paying tribute to the woman Met Commissioner, the woman head of the National Police Chiefs’ Council and the woman head of the National Crime Agency? To have Cressida Dick, Sara Thornton and Lynne Owens all in those top positions is a huge tribute to them and the work they have done to rise through the profession.

Mrs Miller: Coupled with a female Home Secretary, they make a formidable team.

I also want to point out the role of women in business. I represent one of the top 10 centres of business in the south-east, and it is local businesswomen in smaller businesses who I find incredibly inspiring—people like Beryl Huntingdon in my constituency, who runs a business to support other businesses. When I look at my local charities, I see it is often women who are not just helping to run existing charities—people like Evelyn Vincent, who was a founder member of Headway Basingstoke—but setting up new charities. I think of women like Charlie Porter, who set up the Muffin’s Dream Foundation to support families with disabled children, Catherine Waters-Clark, who founded Inspero to help children understand where their food comes from and how they can cook it, and Mary Swan, who is the artistic director of my local producing theatre company.

It does not stop there. If it was not for the women, I do not know what the Church of England would be doing. It is people like Jo Stoker of St Michael’s Church who keep our churches running. We were talking earlier about football teams. Basingstoke Town ladies football team plays in the FA women’s premier league south-west division, and I am hugely proud of the fact that they are doing extremely well—in fact, better than the men’s team.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: May I add to my right hon. Friend’s list someone I am going to see tomorrow in my own constituency? Sally Preston runs a company called Kiddilicious, which she has started from scratch. It is producing fantastically healthy children’s food and is now a multimillion-pound international business.

Mrs Miller: By recognising women who are doing things in other roles and walks of life, we can help to ensure that young women in our schools realise that the only thing that limits them in this world is their imagination and the support they get from their families and their schools to realise their ambitions.

In talking about women in my constituency, I could not fail to refer to the most famous daughter of Basingstoke, Jane Austen. Until very recently, almost nobody in Basingstoke knew that she was born and bred in our borough—the most famous novelist in the world, and we had failed to recognise her. I do not know whether that was because she was a woman, or maybe it was just that people did not like reading her books—I love them, but some people do not; it is an acquired taste. When we commemorated the 200th anniversary of her death, I was immensely proud to be part of a programme to make sure she was better remembered, which culminated in the first ever sculpture of her being put in place in the centre of my town. I would like to put on record my immense thanks to the sculptor, Adam Roud, and Amanda Aldous MBE, who made that project possible. I want to celebrate women now, but also the women who have made my town a great place to live.

Women in Basingstoke are no different from those in the rest of the country—there is prodigious talent—so why are women still paid less than men? In my constituency,
women are paid 25% less than men, and we are in the bottom 4% in the UK. Despite the fact that there is no difference in the levels of education of men and women in my constituency, women are consistently being paid 25% less than men, because they cannot find the sorts of jobs they need to use their experience and talent.

Organisations are working hard to try to reverse this worrying trend of our not using the skills of our people in the way we should. The local borough council has focused on this, and it now has a positive gender pay gap of 2.16%. Of local employers, AWE has a programme to increase female apprentices and clear targets for increasing female management, and Fujitsu has a programme to attract female apprentices. Companies are waking up and realising that they are not using female talent in the way they should.

I very much support the Government’s work on gender pay gap reporting. Such reporting provides the sort of transparency that companies in my constituency need if they are to focus more on this problem. There are about 900 businesses in Basingstoke with more than 250 employees, and I will be looking very closely at gender pay gap reporting to ensure that we capitalise on the skills and talents of women that are otherwise lost to the economy.

I particularly want Ministers to reflect on the availability of flexible working. I was very pleased that the Prime Minister has pointed out the need for flexible working right at the start of somebody’s time in employment. Research by Timewise has shown that at the moment just 6% of job vacancies pay the annualised equivalent of £20,000 a year or more, leaving many women with no option but to take low-paid jobs—often poorly paid jobs with little progression—if they need the flexibility that many require to balance work and family life. I hope that the Prime Minister’s announcement on flexible working last year will be just the start of a much broader set of work that the Government will do to make flexible working a reality from day one for everybody in this country.

As was asked earlier, is this a turning point and a landmark year? I am sure that people at the time of the first and second world wars and in the 1960s and 1970s, when so much of the legislation we enjoy today was put in place, felt that those were landmark years. The reason why we may do better in calling this a landmark year, following all the revelations of sexual harassment in Hollywood and Westminster, is that we have record numbers of women in work, and economic empowerment is such an important part of cementing the changed attitudes that we are all looking for in the debate today.

I hope that the establishment of the Women and Equalities Committee has helped to keep equality issues, particularly those that relate to women, at the top of the agenda, and that it has added to the momentum for change. We started our series of sexual harassment reports in 2016 with one on the sexual harassment of schoolgirls. At the time, I was told that we were expecting children to accept something that had been outlawed in the workplace, but how wrong we were about that. Sexual harassment blights the lives of 30% of women in this country, and we must tackle it. I am pleased that the Select Committee is doing two reports on it at the moment: on sexual harassment in the public realm, and on sexual harassment at work.

1.4 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). She is of course the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee—the first of its kind—on which I have had the honour of serving for the past almost three years. It is a great honour that we have the whole afternoon to debate International Women’s Day. It is also an honour to follow the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), who rightly put it on the record that many women are not recognised in history. It is great that that will be corrected today.

As we mark 100 years since women first secured the vote, we have an opportunity in this place on International Women’s Day to put on the record some of the great successes. However, we must not forget that the reason why we may do better in calling this a landmark year is that we have had to fight for so long for much of what we have achieved, and we still have a long way to go. Today, as we mark Vote 100 and the progress made by women on the centenary of women’s suffrage, we must also note that this year’s theme for International Women’s Day is “Press for Progress”.

In the past 100 years, we have seen incremental advances in women’s rights. In 1928, women were granted universal suffrage. In 1945, the Family Allowances Act introduced child benefits. In 1967, the Abortion Act was enacted in the UK, but this has still not been extended to Northern Ireland. In 1975, the Sex Discrimination Act made it illegal to discriminate against women. In 1985, the Prohibition of Female Circumcision Convention, and I thank the former and the present Home Secretaries for their work in that regard.

This year, the Government will introduce a Bill on domestic violence and abuse. Yet this year, on average, 40% of women will report that they have experienced some form of sexual harassment in the workplace. In Scotland, 58,810 incidents of domestic abuse were reported last year. Rape and attempted rape account for 17% of sexual crimes, and 35% of women have experienced either physical or sexual intimate partner violence or sexual violence by a non-partner at some point in their lives. An estimated 200 million women and girls have undergone female genital mutilation, and the majority of them were cut before they were five. One in five girls in the world are said to be married before the age of 18. One in five lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender women have said that they have experienced a hate crime or incident due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, of whom one in four have not reported this to the police.

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While we recognise that there is still a long way to go, today is an opportunity to celebrate the fact that women have achieved a great deal in the past 100 years. I want to turn around the rather bleak view I have presented and celebrate some of those whom Sky News recently called “Britain’s most influential women”—marking those who have made achievements historically as well as the trailblazing women of today. The list rightly includes suffragettes, to whom we owe a debt, such as Emily Wilding Davison and Emmeline Pankhurst. It also includes great writers such Virginia Woolf and Zadie Smith, and women in the public eye who rightly use their voice to advocate political activism, such as Annie Lennox, Vivienne Westwood and M.I.A.

The list covers prominent female politicians, including of course my own First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, and my colleague and friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black). I might add that my hon. Friend made a brilliant speech yesterday on misogyny, only to be met by further online abuse, which exactly proves the point. I should say that she did get some support, but the point is well made.

While we rightly recognise these extraordinary women and acknowledge the struggles they face in striving to make the world a better place, it is worth recognising the extraordinary women who live otherwise ordinary lives. I therefore wish to pay tribute to some of the truly inspiring women in my constituency of Lanark and Hamilton East. I pay tribute to Carol Clarke, Mary McGowan and Christine Emmet, who have been passionate in promoting Fairtrade and making Hamilton a Fairtrade town. I pay tribute to Donna Barrowman who established the Hope Cafe in Lanark—a charity that supports mental health. I also pay tribute to each member of staff, past and present, of Women’s Aid South Lanarkshire, who do incredible work each day to support women who have suffered from domestic violence, abuse or sexual violence. I also take the opportunity, as always, to put on record the plight of WASPI women, including my constituents Nancy Rea and Lorraine McColl. They continue to fight for the right to a fair pension, although they feel that their voices are largely unheard.

I pay tribute to Loraine Swan, chair of the Lanimer Committee, who plays a key role in keeping the traditions of Lanark alive, and to Liz Wilson, chair of Uddingston Pride, who ensures that the environment and community lie at the heart of her local area. Sheena Campbell, chair of Larkhall Community Council, fights to make her community a better place, and Mavis Daniels of Sivam Hair and Beauty in Hamilton is a pioneering businesswoman who was recently shortlisted for the Black Beauty and Fashion Awards 2018.

Those women are all exceptional, as indeed are women such as Anne Barrett, Josephine McVey, Paula Sullivan, and Margaret McAllister. These women are administrators, teachers, and kitchen staff and have worked hard throughout their adult life, supporting their families, caring for children and aging parents, while also fighting for pension justice, equality, and equal pay. Their voices deserve to be heard just as much as those of every woman on Sky’s list of influential women.

The recent “Time’s Up” movement against sexual harassment, as well as the scandal in this place regarding sexual harassment and the established patriarchy, served to highlight that women in all sectors experience patriarchy, misogyny and bullying in their workplace every day. However, not all women have a voice. We have a long way to go, and we in this place have an opportunity to make a change. Let us then make the most of this 100 years in closing the gender pay gap, tackling maternity and pregnancy discrimination, and encouraging more fathers to take shared parental leave. We must continue to tackle systemic inequality in institutions such as this place, and we must lead by example to create the change we want.

Today, I launched a petition calling on the Government to scrap the 4% tax on claimants of child maintenance for those who have experienced domestic violence in their relationship and who rely on that vital service. Parents should not be penalised for protecting their families, and the Government should not seek to balance the books on the backs of the most vulnerable in our society. Once more I call on the Government to consider using the opportunity presented by the domestic violence and abuse Bill to address that inequity. It is not fair to ask women to pay tax on a service that they ultimately rely on and have no other choice but to take.

I will end with a quote from a truly inspirational woman, Maya Angelou, who said: 

“Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women.”

Let us make our voices heard this afternoon. It is International Women’s Day, and all of those women’s voices deserve to be heard.

1.12 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): It is a privilege to contribute to this hugely important debate. Gender inequality represents the biggest waste of talent on our planet right now, and closing that gap is not only a moral imperative but an economic imperative for us all. The figures on gender inequality are striking. Evidence produced by the McKinsey Global Institute in 2015 estimated that tackling gender inequality, and achieving gender parity across the global economy, would be worth $28 trillion to global GDP. Put in context, that is essentially the economies of China and the US combined. That is probably the biggest economic lever that could be pulled to support jobs and prosperity in our global economy.

I am proud of the work done by the UK internationally, and following the sustainable development goals agreed in 2015, for the first time the world has a to-do list that includes achieving gender equality. Not only is it a long list, it is a comprehensive list that specifically covers areas such as FGM and health inequality. Achieving gender equality is mainstreamed through all the sustainable development goals in a way that is vital if we are to have real change.

The impact that gender equality could have on countries around the world is stark. That impact would be positive not only for economic performance, but for underlying stability and outcomes in society more generally. Gender equality is a good, positive thing that all countries should be striving for, not because it is a nice thing to do, but because it is crucial for us all. Some of the most inspiring people that I met in my time at the Department for International Development were amazing women who were fighting for women’s rights in places like Afghanistan, fighting against child marriage in places...
My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) mentioned the broader workplace reforms that all Governments, including this one, have brought forward to make flexible working a reality. In the end, if we really are to see a difference we have to go beyond laws: attitudes need to change in companies. We all saw what happened at the Presidents Club dinner. I think that is symptomatic of a clear point, which is that change needs to be led from the top. All leaders in all the many companies and organisations that employ people need to realise that they, individually, have to show leadership. They have to drive it through their senior management teams and evidence it not just through their people but in their processes, their systems and the data they collect to ensure they are moving in the right direction.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend like to give credit to Northern Power Women, who this week have been winning awards in Manchester for the great change they have been making in driving forward engagement as role models and agents of change to transform the culture of organisations?

Justine Greening: I very much welcome all the work they are doing, and I hope the awards ceremony goes well. Achieving gender equality is down to all of us. It is a million-piece jigsaw. It is about millions of people around our country and around the world all doing things that add up to something big. “Don’t wait” is my advice to people who want to see things change—get involved and be a part of the change yourself.

We know that gender diversity is good for business. Research from McKinsey showed that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 21% more likely to outperform others on profitability and 27% more likely to have superior value creation. Companies in the top quartile for ethnic and cultural diversity on executive teams were 33% more likely to have industry-leading profitability. Equally, there is a penalty for dropping out. In other words, it is not just that the companies doing this are better performing, but companies not doing this are poor performing. The clear steer is that if someone cares about their business’s growth, they should do it simply for the economics, even if they have not, for some obscure reason, already bought into why this is the right thing to do.

This issue applies to our institution of Parliament. Everything we talk about being good for businesses and employers applies to all of us too. I know that all Members in the Chamber, and many colleagues who are not here, feel as strongly as I do about that. It is up to us to continue to ask ourselves the difficult questions about how our own parties need to change. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke that transparency is crucial. The Conservative party should campaign #AskHerToStand. That is absolutely crucial. It is 100 years since some women first got the vote. Frankly, although we have made a lot of progress, it has not been enough. We have to recognise that unless we work together there is a real danger that the House of
Commons will flatline on about a third of us being women parliamentarians. We need to go above and beyond that.

We should never lose sight of the culture and diversity element of everything I have spoken about today. We should recognise that too many women growing up in our country, often black and minority ethnic women, face a double challenge in being able to make their way.

None of us should be prepared to accept that. Whenever we talk about gender equality we should be explicitly clear that there are groups of women who face even greater challenges, dare I say, than some of the rest of us. Fixing this for every woman is our challenge, and we should not stop until we have achieved it.

Finally, it is 100 years since we got the vote, but the suffragette movement actually began back in the 1860s. I am so pleased they did not give up after 40 years. If there is one message we can all take from that, it is that this is long-term. But I do not want it to be long-term—I want change to happen faster. I do not want to be looking at what we can achieve over the next 100 years; I want us to be looking at what we can achieve in a generation, or in the next five years, 10 years or 15 years.

We need to do that, because lives are ticking by. I had the chance to meet too many girls in too many countries with bags of talent but no opportunity. Their clock is ticking. Every single day that we do not see change fast enough, for them and for the rest of us, is a day of opportunity lost and a day of talent wasted.

I do not accept that our world needs to be like this. I do not accept that our country needs to be like this. We have made a lot of progress, but we have to go further and we have to go faster. I am really proud that all of us here can be a strong voice for women, not just in our country but around the world, to articulate the challenges they often face when they have no way of talking about themselves. We know, looking back over recent years and over the last century, that things can be different. We also know, however, that we have to choose to make them different. If nothing else, this debate is showing that as far as the UK Parliament is concerned, we are making that choice for things to be different. All I can say is that I am going to be part of that change and part of the effort to see the next 100 years deliver much, much more than the last 100 years did.

I want to finish my remarks by saying that all of these women mattered. So many people want to use their experience with which she speaks in the House about violence against women and girls is an epidemic. If as many people died every week at a sporting event, or because they had a specific job, there would be a national outcry. These women deserve the same. We must all do better to hear their stories and to end the culture of male violence that killed them.

The names are: Anne-Marie James; Sabrina Mullings; Sheila Morgan; Tracey Wilkinson; Kanwal Williams; Vicki Hull; Hannah Bladon; Carolyn Hilf; Katrina Eweny; Megan Bills; Karolina Chwiluk; Jane Sherratt; Tracy Kearns; Concepta Leonard; Gemma Leeming; Emma Day; Mohanna Abdhu; Marjorie Cavender; Sobhia Khan; Romina Kalachi; Arena Saeed; Alyson Watt; Sarah Jeffrey; Karen Young; Jean Chapman; Janice Griffiths; Joanne Rand; Ellen Higginbottom; Julie Parkin; Molly McLaren; Vera Savage; Celine Dookhran; Vanessa James; Florina Pastina; Olivia Kray; Farmaz Ali; Elizabeth Jordan; Leanne Collopy; Rikki Lander; Alex Stuart; Leah Cohen; Hannah Cohen; Beryl Hammond; Quyen Ngoc Nguyen; Karen Jacquet; Asiyah Harris; Jessica King; Tyler Denton; Emma Kelty; Jane Hings; Linda Parker; Nasima Noorzai; Katherine Smith; Leanne McKie; Jane Sergeant; Moira Gilbertson; Shaeen Akhtar; Teresa Wishart; Anne O’Neill; Elizabeth Merriman; Janet Northmore; Jillian Howell; Mary Steel; Chloe Mazek; Simone Grainger; Michelle Amison; Patricia McIntosh; Lisa Chadderton; Monika Lasek; Susan Westwood; Ella Parker; Janine Bowater; Suzanne Brown; Rebecca Dykes; Jodie Willsher; Beverley Bliss; Nicole Campbell; Juliana Tudos; Jayne Reat; Jillian Grant; Pauline Cockburn; Julie Fox; Anne Searle; Melanie Clark; Elizabeta Lacatusu; Terrie-Ann Jones; Claire Tavener; Julie Clark; Amelia Blake; Cassie Hayes; Claire Harris; Cheryl Gabriel-Hooper; Ruksana Begum; Saeeda Hussain; Danielle Richardson; Jill Sadler; Lynn McNally; Charlotte Teeling; Crystal Gossett, who was killed with her son, who was 16, and her baby daughter; Diane Gossett; and Laura Huteson. Karen texted me this morning, after she had sent that list, to add three more women to the list from over the weekend: Laura Figueira de Faria; Angela Rider; and Fiona Scourfield.

I also want to read the names of the women murdered at the hands of terrorism in the UK in the last year. It may seem to some that this pattern of violence is different from violence against women and girls; but we in this place must recognise that the patterns of violent behaviour and the perpetration of violence against women and girls have been seen in the history of many of those who go on to commit terrorist atrocities. Their names are: Aysha Frade; Christine Archibald; Kirsty Boden; Sara Zelenak; Angelika Klis; Georgina Callandar; Saffie Roussos; Kelly Brewster; Olivia Campbell; Alison Howe; Lisa Lees; Jane Tweddle-Taylor; Megan Hurley; Nell Jones; Michelle Kiss; Sorrell Leczkowsi; Chloe Rutherford; Eilidh MacLeod; Wendy Fawell; Courtney Boyle; Elaine McIver; and Andreea Cristea.

I want to finish my remarks by saying that all of these women mattered. So many people want to use their political persuasion to assume that perpetrators of this violence look and think in a certain way. I care about all women and want to pay tribute to the All Women Count lobby that is taking place in Parliament to recognise the advanced barriers to support and, if I am honest, our national sympathy—

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady for the passion and experience with which she speaks in the House about
domestic violence and, sadly in this case, murder. She spoke of Alyson Watt, a constituent of mine who was murdered by Gary Brown, who pleaded guilty just a few weeks ago. That horrific crime was compounded by the fact that Alyson’s son was caught up in the act and was critically ill in hospital. He has huge, life-changing injuries. In a bitter irony, Alyson was a senior domestic abuse project worker with Barnardo’s. Her friends said that she dedicated her life and work to helping others. Politicians like us are here today and gone tomorrow, but does the hon. Lady agree that we owe it to Alyson and everyone else she just listed to be much more proactive in our schools and communities to try to end male entitlement and violence?

Jess Phillips: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I thank him for coming here to listen to the name of his constituent and for recognising that just because someone is in the know about domestic violence, as his constituent was, that does not protect them from male violence. I have met women who, on the face of it, people would never think would be victims. We want to cast victims as being one way and it is simply not the case.

We in this place need to recognise our commitment to ending the barriers faced by every woman in this country. We must never, ever forget that that includes refugee women, who face multiple disadvantage in our country and have often suffered before they arrive here—and suffer while they are here—multiple forms of violence, both sexual and domestic. Our test should always be: did we do everything that we could to protect all women? For too many women in this country, the answer to this did we do everything that we could to protect all women? is still simply no. We must do better.

1.36 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is a huge privilege to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), whom I served with on the Women and Equalities Committee. People say, “Do we still need an International Women’s Day?” and I think that her speech sets out exactly the reasons why we do.

It is a huge honour to speak on International Women’s Day, which is a huge opportunity for us all to share in the achievements, particularly in this anniversary year of suffrage. One hundred years ago, some women were first given the vote, but this is also an opportunity to set out our ambitions for the next 10 years, as we come to celebrate the centenary of all women getting the vote, and for the next 100 years, so that the women who will be sitting in this place then can look back and list what our generation has achieved for women. I take the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening); it is important to get on with that, so that they have a long list of achievements to read out in the years to come.

There is still so much to do in this country. We have heard many hon. and right hon. Members set out the issues that women in this country still face around equal pay and the gender pay gap. We just heard the list of names of women who have died by domestic violence. We still have to get 50:50 representation in Parliament, and we also have the ongoing issue of sexual harassment.

Women across the world still face burning injustices. Women in this world are still living in absolute poverty. Women experience rape as a weapon of war on a daily basis. Women still cannot access education, even just to learn to read and write, and as a result, it is not just them but their families who suffer. Women are still being used as sex slaves and trafficked across the world. There is also the issue of female feticide—female babies are valued less than male babies and are often dumped, abandoned or even murdered in some parts of the world because men and male children are valued so much more. We have a huge amount of work to do.

In this anniversary year, to tackle the issue of getting more women into this place, Conservative Members of Parliament have set up a series of “Her Stories,” where we highlight our personal history and how we got into this place. In my new role, when I ask women, “Why don’t you stand for Parliament, for local government, for your local assembly or as a police and crime commissioner?” one of the most common comments I hear is that they do not think that they have what it takes to make a difference. Highlighting our individual stories shows that we have such a diverse mix of people in this place from all parties—people have done different jobs, come from different backgrounds and are of different classes or faiths—and we all have a right to be here.

Listening to the individual personal stories of how women got into this place will hopefully encourage other women out there to think, “Yes, I can do that.” I say this to women: “If you are coming here because you want to be the third female Prime Minister of this country, you are probably coming here for the wrong reason. If you are coming here because you care passionately about an issue and you will not stop until you have achieved your aim, you are exactly the right person to come here, regardless of your background or experience.”

Mrs Miller: I want put on record the extraordinary work that my hon. Friend does, the experience as a former nurse that she brought to the Women and Equalities Committee, and the experience that she brings to the House as a whole, which provides an example for us all. She is absolutely right to highlight the importance of those stories in inspiring other women to come here.

Maria Caulfield: I thank my right hon. Friend for her kind comments. She herself is an absolute inspiration to those stories in inspiring other women to come here. The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) mentioned her grandmother. A hundred years ago, my own grandmother did not have the right to vote. My family were Irish Catholics, and it was not until 1922 that women in southern Ireland—and men—were given the vote. In Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom, many Catholic women and men could not vote in local elections until the Electoral Law Amendment Act 1968 came into force, mainly because the Irish Catholic community were neither homeowners nor ratepayers and were therefore disqualified. I welcome our celebration of what happened 100 years ago, and I shall welcome our celebration in 10 years’ time, but I think it was a travesty that there were women in the United Kingdom who could not vote simply because of the community from which they came.

In the next generation of the family is my aunt, who came over from Ireland to work in this country. She actually worked in this place—in the dining rooms,
serving Members of both this House and the other place. She has many a tale to tell about her time working here, although you will pleased to know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I will not reveal any of them today. One of her abiding memories is of being able to pay tribute to Winston Churchill when he was lying in state. I am honoured to follow in her footsteps by also working in this place, although in a different role.

We all have family stories to tell that would make a difference, and we should be loud and proud about our history. It concerns me, however, that although we are achieving equality for women, we are not achieving it for all women, in this country or in the world. It is important that when we fight for equality for women, we do so for all women, and those in the most vulnerable communities often need our help the most.

I am also slightly nervous about the discord in this country that makes some women more equal than others, and gives some a greater right than others to speak out on women's issues. We are a broad church of women in this place, and within our own political parties there is a broad church of women who have come here with different experiences and values, and different issues on which they want to campaign. My message is that there is no right or wrong issue on which to campaign. We all have different views about the NHS, education and the economy, and we all have a right to express those views. It is important for us, as a group of sisters, to respect each other’s views: we may debate them and, perhaps, argue against them, but we must respect the fact that we all have the right to express them.

Let me pursue that point by highlighting the person from whom I take inspiration on the political scene. You would of course, Madam Deputy Speaker, expect Margaret Thatcher to be one of my political heroines. I grew up in a working-class area of south London where there was little or no aspiration for a working-class kid like me, but on television I saw a woman who—although she had a posh accent, often wore a string of pearls, and carried a handbag at all times—told me from that television screen that it did not matter where I came from; it was what I wanted to do and how hard I was prepared to work for it that was going to make the difference.

You would expect Florence Nightingale to be high on my heroine list, Madam Deputy Speaker. As a nurse I worked at St Thomas’ hospital, and did courses at the Nightingale training school. She transformed not just nursing but healthcare in this country. You would also expect Marie Curie to be high on the list, Madam Deputy Speaker. As someone who worked in cancer care, I know that she put her life on the line to increase scientific advances and make a difference to cancer treatment. My greatest respect, however, goes to someone in a political sphere very different from mine. She sat on the Opposition Benches, but she is my absolute political heroine. She has, I believe, been underrated and underestimated in the history of women in politics.

We often talk about Northern Ireland nowadays. We talk about issues related to Brexit and a frictionless border; about the lack of an Executive and the lack of an Assembly; and about the Good Friday agreement. We highlight the work of John Major, Tony Blair and George Mitchell, but we have airbrushed the work of Mo Mowlam. I think that if she were still here, we would completely disagree on issues of health, education and economics, but I hold her absolutely in respect for the work that she did in bringing the nationalist and Protestant communities together in one room. At a time when there was not a female leader of the Democratic Unionist party or a female leader of Sinn Féin, she was in a room full of men and had to knock heads together. She was a straight-talking woman, she was a feisty and funny woman, and she got things done that other people could not do. She was the first female Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and I think that her efforts should be recognised.

I absolutely take on board the advice that we should never meet our heroes in life because we will only be disappointed, but I had an opportunity to meet Mo Mowlam when I was working as a nurse in Brighton and she was giving a talk at Sussex University. I had never been to the university before, and I did not really “do” political talks. I was not into politics; I just voted. I went in elections. I went to see Mo Mowlam and hear her talk because I was so inspired by the work that she was doing for the Irish Catholic community in Northern Ireland and, indeed, for all communities by bringing them together. Her talk was funny and witty, and she was everything that I had expected her to be. I went up to her and asked her to sign a copy of her autobiography for my other half, who was working overseas at the time. She refused to do it. She said, “I am not going to sign a book and dedicate it to him if he could not make the effort to be here. I will sign it to you, as a woman—and you must keep up the good work of being interested in becoming politically aware.”

I think that Mo Mowlam was one of the great politicians of our time. She was a fantastic woman, and we must remember her and all the work that she did. She was a woman you could do business with, whichever side of the political divide you came from.

This is an opportunity and a time for us to recognise that equality is not about everyone being the same. We can have differences and still strive together for equality for all. Calling someone less of a sister because she is on a different side of the argument does not really promote our cause of achieving equality for all women. We have fought so hard to get freedom for women, and we have fought so hard to get freedom of speech and freedom to vote, but we still have so much more to do. So let us celebrate our differences and embrace them. One of my favourite sayings from Mo Mowlam was, “You are never terrified when you say what you mean,” which is something to which I still aspire. With that in mind, let us celebrate today. Let us remember the women who have made this country great, and let us work together to tackle the issues that still exist.

1.49 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): I am very proud to be sitting on these famous green Benches on International Women’s Day, surrounded by other women representing constituencies in all four corners of the United Kingdom.

Since the Representation of the People Act 1918 and the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918, both of which celebrate their 100th anniversary this
year, significant advances have been made in ensuring that Parliament represents more accurately the country that it serves. Since those Acts, 489 women have been elected as Members of this House—a milestone that must have seemed so distant to women such as Mary Smith, who delivered the first women’s suffrage petition to Parliament in 1832. Currently, there are 208 female MPs, and I am honoured to be the first female MP for Coventry North East.

Alongside those Acts, great changes—including the industrial revolution and both world wars—successfully challenged the notion that a woman’s role was solely industrial. The battle is far from won. Yes, it is fantastic that we have 208 female MPs in the House, but that equates to only 32%. At the last general election, only an additional 12 women were elected; at the current rate it will take 50 years to achieve gender equality in Parliament. One hundred years after some women won the right to vote, and some were afforded the opportunity to stand for election as an MP, the fight for political equality must continue.

I am proud to come from a party that has such an impressive record on striving to achieve these things. Labour has more female MPs than all other parties put together and is the only party to advocate the use of all-women shortlists to address the inequalities still present in the current system.

I have seen many, many changes from when I first started work—in a job where I did not get equal pay. I was happy to see the introduction of the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Work and Families Act 2006, which extended the right to statutory maternity leave for a full year. When I had my children, I was back at work after six weeks and 12 weeks respectively. I needed the money, and I needed to keep my job.

As we have heard in previous contributions, there have been many other advances in the cause of women’s equality. However, more still needs to be done, especially regarding maternity rights and the gender pay gap. In Coventry—the city I represent—a recent survey found that fewer than 20% of female respondents felt they are treated equally to men. A further 42% believed they have experienced gender discrimination in the workplace, and nearly 60% felt that women are under pressure to look good at all times.

It is clear that significant advances have been made since the Representation of the People Act and the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act. However, the results of that survey are alarming and remind us how far we have yet to go. Women are still paid less than men in many fields, and gender stereotypes surrounding certain degree subjects and industries still exist. Women are still objectified in the media, and for many, politics remains a man’s world, with many women feeling this glass ceiling will never, ever shatter. We have come so far, but the fight for gender equality is not over. With cuts, especially to tax credits, the NHS and social care budgets, it is often women who are hit the hardest.

Before I conclude, I would like to pay tribute on this special day to a great, strong and formidable woman, who was elected and who swept to power on 3 May 1979. She was a woman who inspired a young woman who watched her every move—a young woman who, because of that woman’s inspiration and very presence, would become the 414th woman ever to be elected to this place. She is probably not the person Members are thinking of: this great woman lived in Coventry, and in her kitchen there was a plaque that said, “A woman’s place is in her trade union”. Her name was Dorothy Dalton; she was my mother, and she was elected to Coventry City Council on that very night—a night when the Labour party swept to power in Coventry.

Great women inspire other women. Women of influence give other women confidence. Thinking about all women around the world, I hope the Minister will join me in honours International Women’s Day with not only a reflection on what we have achieved so far, but an acknowledgment that more can and must be done for gender equality.

1.54 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a great delight to follow the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher). As other Members have said, we may disagree when we are in this Chamber, but there are occasions when we agree. The hon. Lady and I have had some good conversations and discussions in all-party parliamentary groups, and we agree on many other issues, so I thank her for her words in support of ladies in Coventry. I am delighted to be able to speak in this important debate, partly because the issue, as so many other hon. Members have said, is very important, but also because, even in 2018, too many women are not allowed a voice.

What are we celebrating? We are celebrating 100 years of the Representation of the People Act 1918. We are celebrating 60 years of the Life Peerages Act 1958, under which life peers of both sexes can be Members of the Lords—that was not possible before that Act. We are celebrating 90 years since the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928 was passed, which gave women electoral equality with men—in 10 years’ time, we will have even more celebrations, which is fantastic. It is 100 years since the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918. Later this year, on 14 December, it will also be 100 years since the 1918 general election, when finally women over 30 and virtually all men over 21 could vote in a general election for the first time.

In Erewash, we have had female representation since 1992, when Angela Knight was elected. She was followed, in 1997, by Liz Blackman; in 2010, by Jessica Lee; and, in 2015, by me. That is 26 years of Erewash being represented by women. I know for definite that, for half of those years, women were selected to fight the seat because they were the best, not because they were women. It is important that women feel able to put themselves forward for positions as Members of Parliament or on boards of directors, or for whatever role they want.

Let me talk about what else is happening in Erewash. Our current mayor is Councillor Mary Hopkinson, and the leader of Erewash Borough Council is Carol Hart. No one can doubt the excellent reputation Erewash has for female representation.

In previous debates on International Women’s Day, I have highlighted the great women in my constituency who are active today. I am always fearful that I will miss someone out, so today I recognise them in general for all the work they do. I also want to look back 100 years,
because that is really what we are celebrating. I want to extol the virtues of another Erewash lady, who was alive 100 years ago. Dame Laura Knight was born in 1877, and she passed away in 1970. She was a highly acclaimed artist, who really embraced English impressionism. In her long career, Dame Laura was among the most successful and popular painters in Britain. She was created a Dame in 1929, and in 1936 she became the first woman elected to full membership of the Royal Academy—the Royal Academy was established in 1768, so it took a long time for the first woman to become a member.

During the first world war, Dame Laura was prohibited from painting her beloved coastal scenes, in case the artwork posed a security risk when it was displayed. Her husband Harold was a conscientious objector during the war and was required to work as a farm labourer as a result. They lived through a time when women were not represented and many men did not have representation either.

When we got to the second world war, Dame Laura was asked to produce a recruitment poster for the Women's Land Army—once again, she played an important role in getting women involved and playing their part. In the aftermath of the war, Dame Laura was famous for her oil painting “The Nuremberg Trial”, which was reportedly greatly praised by those who had witnessed the trials, but not by those in the art world.

Dame Laura Knight—no doubt without realising it—broke many of the rules and the barriers put up by men. I am sure she has been a great role model to many people since, particularly in the art world. I am known in this House for pushing science, technology engineering and maths—STEM—subjects, yet I have just extolled the virtues of an artist. To me, however, this is all about breaking down barriers wherever they might be.

Growing up, I was an active girl guide, and I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to that organisation and all other youth organisations, whether for girls or boys, for the work that they do in our communities and for the real difference that they make. Each year, Girlguiding puts out an attitude survey, and the 2017 girls attitude survey shows some disturbing data. It shows that 64% of 13 to 21-year-olds have experienced sexual harassment in school in the past year. Sadly, that figure has gone up by 5% since 2014. The survey also shows that 55% of girls aged seven to 21 say that gender stereotypes affect their ability to say what they think, and that 30% of girls aged 11 to 16 think that computing is more for boys. In addition, 76% of girls aged 11 to 21 feel confident in their IT skills, but just 37% would consider a job in technology. There is a huge mismatch in that information, and it is really worrying. The survey shows that we have much more to do, and I hope that debates such as today’s will play a part in breaking down those barriers and letting girls know that they can do whatever they want.

We all want equality, and we all want the barriers to whatever we do to be removed, but it is also important that we have choices. It is important that we recognise the contribution made by those women who take the decision to dedicate many years to raising our future generations. My mum was one of those women who stayed at home to bring up her family, and I want to finish by repeating something that she said to me as I was approaching 18. Her words have stayed in my mind, and I remember them every time we get near to an election. Her words were more of an instruction. She said: “Women died for us to have the vote. Always vote.”

2.1 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) and to hear so many inspirational speeches across the House today. In particular, I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for her moving tribute to the victims of violence in our country.

It is fitting that we should mark International Women’s Day alongside the 100th anniversary of the Representation of the People Act 1918. My constituency has a proud history of women being pioneers and fighting for women’s rights and workers’ rights, going back to the matchwomen’s strike of 1888 and to the establishment of the East London Federation of the Suffragettes, led by Sylvia Pankhurst, which was based in Bow and had branches all over the east end. The suffragettes grounded their campaign in the everyday reality of working women’s lives and fought for a living wage, decent housing, equal pay, food price controls, adequate pensions and much else. They saw the vote as just one aspect of the struggle for equality, and while it was an important step towards equality, it represented a partial victory rather than a complete one. We owe a huge amount to them for giving us the opportunity to stand here today and speak in this debate, and to make a contribution to public life in our country and internationally. Much progress has been made since then, but we have so much more to do in relation to women’s status, safety, rights, pay and representation.

I am incredibly proud of the fact that I am one of the three Muslim women elected to Parliament in 2010, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood). I am also proud of the fact that many other Muslim women and women from other faith backgrounds and from black and minority ethnic backgrounds have entered Parliament, but there is much more to be done to increase the number of women and those from other backgrounds in our Parliament. I want to pay tribute to the women in Parliament who enabled us to get here. They were the pioneers who first arrived here, and I want to single out two in particular.

The first is my Labour predecessor, Oona King, who is now a member of the House of Lords. She was only the second black woman to be elected to this House. The other is the former deputy leader of our party, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Mishal Harman), who has done so much for us and for our country, and who commands the support of women across the House. I certainly would not be here were it not for the encouragement and support from her and from many other women in public life.

I hope that we can continue to build on that by ensuring that women have the confidence, the encouragement, the support, the networks and the back-up to enable them to charge ahead and to stand for positions
in public life. That is why I took the step of setting up the UpRising leadership charity, which has cross-party support. It supports women and men—particularly women—from white working class and ethnic minority backgrounds to enter public life in the professions and, particularly, in politics. We work in different constituencies so that the next generation can have the support it needs and does not have to struggle in the way that previous generations have done.

I have heard many stories of people deciding to stand for Parliament and being told, “You can’t do that because people won’t support a woman.” Having the audacity to stand is still a challenge for many women. Too often, they are told that they cannot make it because they will not have the support of the people in their communities or that they will not have the support of the men. It is when women push forward and stand, as I and many others have done, that those preconceptions and prejudices are shown to be wrong. That is why we must continue to encourage young women to stand for public life and for positions in politics locally and nationally, despite all the online abuse and all the stories of abuse and injustice that we have heard in the past year. I hope that we can all continue to work together on that effort.

We have achieved a great deal, as we have heard today, but the focus on progress must continue. Progress comes with pressure. Over the past year, we have seen the #MeToo campaign and other campaigns relating to the plight of women emerging in countries where we do not expect women to suffer in this way, and that tells us that we still have much to do. Around the world, women continue to bear the brunt of poverty, of war, of sexual violence and of climate change. There are 130 million girls not in education, and 15 million girls of primary school age who will never get the chance to learn to read or write in primary school. Globally, more than a third of women are subject to violence, and 750 million women and girls are married before the age of 18. Far too often, women still bear the brunt of the conflicts around the world. They are exposed to brutal attacks, often as deliberate tools of political and ethnic violence. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, women are far more likely than soldiers to be victims of violence. In Sudan, rape has been used as a weapon of war by Government and opposition forces. A report published by the International Rescue Committee last year stated that the scale of violence against women and girls in South Sudan was double the global average.

**Justine Greening:** The hon. Lady is making an important point. A longer-term consequence of children in those communities growing up with violence around them is that domestic violence rates, even after peace is secured, are way higher than in other countries. It is vital that she makes that point, and she is quite right to do so.

**Rushanara Ali:** I thank the right hon. Lady. I must continue to support our aid effort.

**Emma Little Pengelly** (Belfast South) (DUP): The hon. Lady is making a powerful point. Does she agree that much more should be done to encourage more women to take part in making peace? There should be greater recognition of the valuable role that women can play in creating peace agreements and trying to end conflict. In Northern Ireland, very many women helped to bring about the peace that we enjoy today.

**Rushanara Ali:** I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. We have seen the important contribution that women can make, but they are too often left out of the negotiations. Our Government must continue to push forward and ensure that women have a strong voice in peace negotiations.

Many girls whose lives have already been devastated by conflict in their own countries are being forced into situations that no child should have to face. They are living cycles of abuse, exploitation and trauma. Some 70% of the Rohingya who have fled to Bangladesh from conflict in Myanmar are women and children, and the United Nations has identified what has happened in Myanmar as a textbook example of ethnic cleansing and that genocide cannot be ruled out. It is increasingly apparent that the Burmese military has systematically used rape and violence against Rohingya women as part of their campaign of terror. They have torched villages and tortured civilians, particularly women. According to a UN report, girls aged as young as five or seven were raped, often in front of their relatives and sometimes by three to five men taking turns, all dressed in army uniforms. The report goes on to detail accounts of summary executions, torture and disappearances. I have visited the region several times in recent years and have spoken to refugees who have fled violence and who have shared stories of rape and violence against them. As the world watches on, our Government must ensure that those who have perpetrated the violence—the Burmese military—are held to account and that a referral is made to the International Criminal Court.

Violence against women is a violation of human rights, and we have a collective responsibility to protect women here in this country and around the world from the appalling suffering that they face and to address the implications of that suffering for their children. Britain has a proud history as a leader in international development, and we must continue to press for progress. As other hon. Members have pointed out, the millennium development goals galvanised efforts from countries around the world to meet the needs of the world’s poorest and most vulnerable, particularly women. We must also continue to support the sustainable development goals and encourage other countries to do the same. The 2030 agenda for sustainable development, which has gender equality and women’s empowerment at its heart and which was adopted by world leaders in 2015, offers a significant opportunity for progress. The first SDG aims to end poverty in all its forms everywhere, and the fifth seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. I urge Ministers across Government to champion the need to achieve those goals and to continue to support our aid effort.
In conclusion, I want to share a personal story. I was born in a country, Bangladesh, that was born out of a conflict in which millions of people lost their lives. Rape and violence were used as weapons of war, and that continues to be the case in many other countries today. We must all continue to work hard to ensure that we bring an end to sexual violence in conflict.

2.15 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is an honour to follow a moving speech by the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali). One of my faults is usually overconfidence, but I confess that I begin to speak in this debate with a degree of nervousness. So much often goes wrong when men try to talk about issues related to women and their rights, and I could too easily end up saying that women need to step up when the truth is that grotesque imbalances at a senior level often mean that it is men who need to step up and work with women to deconstruct the obstacles that stand in the path of female progress. We need more men from all sides of the political debate to step up and speak up about that in this place.

I could also easily end up being one of those men who says that simply because we have a female Prime Minister, a female Home Secretary and more female MPs than ever, this debate should be over. However, just because suicide is a disproportionately young, male problem that does not mean that a gender pay gap, whereby women effectively work for free for 63 days a year, is okay. We need to work on both those issues, not pretend that one cancels out the other. Worse still, the deeper one goes into such issues, the more likely it is that one will be accused of mansplaining, and then one will hear from the Prime Minister. I hope to avoid most of that, and I want instead to make three points.

I could not go on the women’s march on Sunday, but I was sorry to miss it, so I tweeted as much, saying:

“A better gender balance will make parliament stronger for everyone.”

For just a few hours, I subsequently received if not the torrent of abuse that women often receive on Twitter, then a small flood of abuse. Twitter is not an equal opportunities abuser, but users were certainly keen to tell me what equal opportunities would look like. Users told me that a meritocracy would produce the best Parliament, never mind if it was a balanced Parliament. The more I explained that I am not in favour of positive discrimination—I had not said that I was—the more I realised that Twitter was showing me what being mansplained to feels like. While it seems self-evident that, in an equal society, a balance in Parliament or the workplace is an obvious consequence of equality of opportunity, to too many it is not. Likewise, it seems obvious that if an equal Parliament better reflects the population it serves, it better represents that population and acts more instinctively in the whole country’s interests.

In saying all that, I cannot help thinking that I am preaching to the converted here, but I was shocked to see that what felt obvious to me was interpreted as an attack on men, and that is the second thing that I want to talk about. Too many people still seem to think that men have to lose for feminism to succeed. The reality is surely that a society that draws without discrimination on the talents of all its members is better for all its members. When women are treated better, men and women are the winners. A fairer division of labour both in how people bear the burdens of childcare and in the pressure of earning the money that pays the mortgage would benefit everyone. Men have nothing to fear from the shards of glass that fall after the shattering of the glass ceiling.

Finally, I want to talk about what men might do to create a society that is so equal that nobody would bat an eyelid at the idea of a man having the same aspirations to equality as a woman. Here are a few tiny ideas: should men—still more often the senior people at work—do more to promote the flexible working that might promote equality? Should the Government incentivise that? Should teacher training include more on the casual use of language, which shapes children, whereby boys are good if they are strong, and girls are praised for being pretty, but somehow “pretty boy” doesn’t always ring true as a compliment? Should toy manufacturers think more carefully, as they increasingly do, about whether blue is always for boys? Should we not consider that if we make catcalling a hate crime, we are treating the symptom, when all of us here should be committed to treating the causes of sexist behaviour wherever it starts? Should we not all do all of that, because when the country is better for all women, it will be better for all men, too?

I wanted to speak not because I am some paragon of right-on virtue—

Gavin Newlands: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Matt Warman: On the point of my virtue, I give way.

Gavin Newlands: I have no knowledge of the hon. Gentleman’s virtue, but I thank him for giving way. I praise him for a good speech so far. May I add to his list? He should join the white ribbon campaign and the all-party parliamentary group for the white ribbon campaign UK, so that we can try to end violence against women and girls. He is most welcome at our meeting next Tuesday.

Matt Warman: Not least because the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is nodding vigorously on the Front Bench, I take it that the white ribbon is a good campaign to join. It is obviously a weakness that I do not know a huge amount about it. I will do my best to join the hon. Gentleman on Tuesday.

I am not pretending that I am a paragon of virtue on this matter, or indeed on any other; I wanted to speak because I know that I am not. The more we are conscious, across this House, of where we are weak, the stronger we can be. I know how often I have failed to step up, at home, at work and in this Chamber—it is not always possible to do so, for a whole host of very real reasons—but personally and professionally, inequality is the loss of all of us. Now more than ever, we need men to stand up with women for fairness, because we will all be better off for it.

2.21 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I feel immensely privileged to speak in this debate to mark International Women’s Day, 100 years after some women
first got the vote. I represent the borough of Lewisham, where, I am proud to say, 100 years after women got the right to be Members of Parliament, we have three female MPs. I am delighted to go on to serve alongside my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), and for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), who have given me immeasurable support before and after my election to this place. The borough of Lewisham has been pioneering in gender equality. In the 1970s, the council set up the Lewisham women’s rights working party. I am proud to say that we have no gender pay gap on Lewisham Council, and we have more women in senior council roles than men.

So much has been done over the last 100 years to promote gender equality—the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999, and the Equality Act 2010 to name but a few—but there is still a great deal more to be done. Having worked as an employment rights lawyer for many years, I all too often saw women demoted or dismissed after returning from maternity leave, and employers putting up unnecessary barriers to flexible working. I saw women being paid less than men for work of equal value, and women who were too afraid to speak out when they were discriminated against, for fear of losing their job.

Those experiences motivated me to try to make a difference. Two years ago, on International Women’s Day, after I had become a mum, I launched my business providing affordable legal advice to women who had maternity and sex discrimination at work, which I ran until I was elected to this place. I wish there was no demand for such a business, but there was, and that is borne out by the statistics.

In 2016, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Equality and Human Rights Commission undertook a major piece of research on the prevalence and nature of maternity discrimination at work. The results, based on survey interviews with more than 3,000 mothers and 3,000 employers, are quite shocking. More than three in four mothers—77%—said that they had a negative or discriminatory experience before, during or after their maternity leave. One in five mums reported experiencing harassment or negative comments from colleagues or their employer relating to pregnancy or flexible working. Ten per cent. of mums said that their employer discouraged them from attending antenatal appointments, and 11% said that they felt forced to leave their job after having a child. Scaled up, that amounts to 54,000 women a year being forced to leave their job simply for becoming a mum.

According to the Fawcett Society, the mean aggregate gender pay gap for part-time and full-time workers stands at 18.4%. At the current rate of progress, it will take more than 100 years to close the gap, which is just not acceptable. There is a huge amount more that should and can be done to end gender inequality at work. The Select Committee on Women and Equalities has made strong recommendations in this area that have yet to be enacted by the Government.

To start with, all jobs should be advertised as flexible by default, unless there is a strong business case for them not to be. In the age of technology, being sat behind a desk in an office from 9 am until 6 pm, five days a week, is rarely necessary, yet the culture of presenteeism—of staying late in the office but not necessarily being productive—persists. A cultural shift is needed in the way that we work, with compressed hours, home working, staggered hours or term-time working becoming the norm, so that families—both men and women—can better strike a work-life balance, and so that having children does not diminish prospects at work.

We urgently need proper paid paternity leave to be introduced. Shared parental leave has been a step in the right direction, but take-up has been low—it is only at an estimated 2%—and the statutory rates of pay mean that it is only really an option for those in high-income families or those with savings. In addition, the model of transferring leave from mum to dad does not work for all families. Instead, non-transferable paternity leave, paid at a rate closer to actual earnings, should be implemented. Only then will we get the cultural shift at work needed to end stereotypes about women being a burden on business, and the assumption that they alone will be responsible for childcare duties. That would go a long way towards ending the gender pay gap sooner rather than later.

Laws on maternity discrimination and enforcement of breaches also need toughening up. To start with, it should be made harder for women to be made redundant after their maternity leave. Regulation 10 of the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999 gives women some protection against being made redundant while pregnant or on maternity leave, but the protected period ends when the woman returns to work. That does not make sense, given that very often it is exactly when a new mum comes back to work that they begin to feel pushed out. To strengthen our discrimination laws, the period of protection against redundancy should be extended to 12 months after a women returns to work following her maternity leave.

We also need stricter sanctions against employers who breach discrimination laws or fail to publish details of their gender pay gap. I welcome the Labour policy launched today by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). It would help to close the gender pay gap by ensuring that all private and public employers with more than 250 staff had to audit their gender pay gaps—and, furthermore, prove that they were taking action to close the gap—or face strict penalties. If employers risk losing money, they are more likely to comply with their legal obligations.

Finally, rights are often far too difficult to enforce. According to the charity Maternity Action, the introduction of employment tribunal fees led to a reduction of 40% in maternity discrimination claims. I am alarmed that there have been suggestions by Conservative Members that fees might be reintroduced, albeit at a lower level. Tribunal fees are a clear barrier to access to justice for women who have been discriminated against at work.

The time limit for bringing a claim for maternity discrimination in the employment tribunal is three months from the act complained of. Both the Women and Equalities Committee and the Equality and Human Rights Commission have said that this is not long enough. Those with a newborn baby at home are likely to be having sleepless nights, not to mention feeding round the clock and endless nappy changes. New mums also often go through a huge period of readjustment, physically and mentally, so the notion that they will engage with a complex legal process is simply unrealistic.
in many cases. It is likely that far more women would assert their rights if the time limit was increased from three months to six.

Later today, I will be proud to mark International Women’s Day by speaking at an event in Lewisham alongside some of the original members of the Lewisham women’s rights working party. We will reflect not only on how much has been achieved over the past few decades, but on how much more we still have to do: ending the gender pay gap once and for all; making flexible working the norm rather than the exception; and promoting shared caring responsibilities. Only then will we achieve true gender equality at work.

2.30 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is huge honour to be called to speak as the first woman Member of Parliament for Chelmsford on this, the International Women’s Day in the 100th year since women won the vote. Yesterday I became a member of the Women and Equalities Committee and attended my first meeting. There are a number of mothers on that Committee, and we were looking at the challenges faced by the parents of a newborn baby. We came up with a long list of recommendations, every one of which is to help fathers, because it is only by working together that we will achieve equality. I want to thank the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and, especially, my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) for their contributions in this debate.

I am also a member of the Science and Technology Committee. As this is also the Year of Engineering, I want to focus my words on issues that affect women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. EngineeringUK estimates that the demand for graduate engineers outstripped supply by 20,000 people last year. We aspire to be a world-leading, 21st-century, innovative economy, but to achieve that we will need to double the number of engineering students at our universities. We will succeed only if we inspire the next generation of young women in our schools to take up the opportunities of science and tech.

Before coming to the House today, I attended an assembly at Barnes Farm Junior School in Chelmsford. I met Ada Barnes, who is in year 3. Ada told me that she is named after Ada Lovelace, who was the pioneer of computing. She invented the first algorithm that was run on a computer. She was the world’s first computer programmer and the mother of the digital revolution. We all know about Charles Babbage. He invented the machine, but she discovered what the machine could do. Ada Barnes asked me which woman in history had inspired me, so who do I choose? Do I choose my own daughter’s namesake, Elizabeth, our great Queen today? Do I choose Elizabeth I, who stood at the dockside at Tilbury as the Spanish armada was approaching and explained that she had

“the body of a weak, feeble woman; but...the heart and stomach of a king”?

She defended our country. Do I choose my namesake, Queen Victoria, who not only ran the huge British empire, but was mother to nine children? Or, at a time when I said I want to focus on women in science, do I focus on Margaret Thatcher, not only our first woman Prime Minister, but a scientist, too?

Maria Caulfield: Does my hon. Friend recognise that Margaret Thatcher was also the scientist behind the Mr Whippy ice cream?

Vicky Ford: Absolutely, which goes to show how interesting science is. Women in science make great leaders, and women doctors have already broken though the glass ceiling in so many ways. Last year, the chair of the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges brought together the presidents of the Royal Colleges of Surgeons, of Physicians, of Pathologists, of Radiologists, of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, of General Practitioners and of Paediatrics and Child Health. They were joined by the outgoing president of the Royal College of Ophthalmologists for a photo call. Every one of the nine people present was a woman. Our chief medical officer, Professor Dame Sally Davies, is a phenomenal woman, leading the world with her campaigns on antimicrobial resistance and now focusing on air quality. Those who are interested in technology, tech ethics and artificial intelligence should go and meet our Information Commissioner, Elizabeth Denham, as she is inspirational. She has degree in history and a masters in informational science.

However, there are other areas of science in which we are not doing at all well. Fewer than one in 10 of the engineers in this country are women, and we have the lowest level of female engineering professionals anywhere in Europe. Not only are we behind Germany and France, but we are way behind countries such as Latvia, Bulgaria and Cyprus. We must do better. Increasing the number of pupils taking maths at A-level is key. In November, the Government announced that schools would get an additional £600 for every additional pupil taking A-level maths. That has the potential to be transformational, so I thank Ministers for that. I hope that it will dramatically increase the number of pupils studying maths, but it will not necessarily solve the problem. That is because already nearly four out of 10 of the people doing maths A-level are girls, so that is not where the issue lies. The problem is in physics.

To become an engineer, one needs to do not only maths but physics. Girls are really good at physics. At GCSE, the classes are 50:50; some 64,000 girls passed physics GCSE last year, with nearly half of them receiving a top grade—an A or A*. That is brilliant, but at A-level the level drops from 50:50 to girls making up just one in five students. That ratio has not changed in 20 years, so we must encourage young women to do more in physics.

I need to declare an interest: I did physics A-level and I did win a prize. I won a silver medal in the physics Olympiad. I still have the book I was awarded, and inside the front cover is an inscription that is addressed to “Mr Victoria” and congratulates “him” on “his achievement”. I gave up physics—let us just say that I did not think that this was a career that valued me. That is ancient history, and a generation later much has changed, but we do need to encourage girls and to give them the evidence of why that career wants them.

I told the primary school assembly at Barnes Farm today three reasons why the girls might wish to consider a career in engineering. The first was that they are
wanted. One third of companies say that they cannot find the STEM skills they need, so if girls do science and technology, they will find jobs. The second was that they will make money, because those jobs will be well paid. The evidence shows us that girls who have studied maths and one other science at A-level earn, on average, 30% more than their peers—an extra 30p for every pound. The third was that they will be happy. A recent study of more than 300 women engineers found that more than 80% of them said they were happy or very happy with their career choice. How many people can say that?

Taking a degree in engineering is a passport to work all across the world. Engineering gave us flight and helped to break through the frontier of space. Just last month, I was at CERN in Switzerland, where our engineers are uncovering the secrets of the universe. Taking up a career in engineering does not mean giving up all the glitz and the glamour. Just 10 days ago, at the catwalks in Milan, they had got rid of the models and instead the handbags were flown down the catwalks and paraded by a squadron of drones.

Today is International Women’s Day. It is a century since women got the vote. It is also the Year of Engineering. May I ask that we encourage all the women and men in this House to use that opportunity to go out and inspire the young women in our schools and classrooms to consider a career in engineering?

2.39 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is an honour and a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), with whom I shared that memorable trip to CERN last month—it was a joy. I was particularly moved to come across not one but two of my old school friends, both female, working on the large hadron collider—I very nearly understood what one of those ways is the domestic stocktake—others have already mentioned some of this, but I will give a few more examples. The date of 8 March gives us a nudge to ask how we are doing on different dimensions of gender equality. We can look at the affordability and availability of childcare, at gender pay gaps, as others have mentioned, and at the impact of public sector finance cuts on women’s lives. All those give us a sieve for sifting out the stubborn aspects of economic and other inequalities.

Another value of today is that it nudges us to lift our gaze to the rest of the world. We should be asking how the millennium development goals have benefited women and girls. How might women’s lives be improved by better, more inclusive and more transparent processes for trade negotiations, for example? Those things matter, yet women get left out of those questions and processes. What is the availability—or otherwise—of water, sanitation, healthcare, education, finance and technology doing to limit or assist women’s and girls’ routes to learning and employment across the world?

A third value—the one I want to focus on—is that of imagining. What would a world free from gender inequality look like? How would we recognise it, how would it be better for women and for men, what more do we need to do to get there, and how will women’s liberation truly change the world? Well, it would be a world in which no woman would ever be fearful or uncomfortable walking down a city centre street or into an office, whatever the time of day or night, wherever they are and whatever they are wearing. It would be a world in which it was unthinkable that my nieces would ever be sexually harassed, or even have to think about the possibility. It would be a world in which it was impossible that my mother could not imagine, which is a marker
of why International Women's Day is still so important. To me, it should be unimaginable that any man would ever think it was an option or something they would want to do. It would be a world in which rape was a part of history. It would be a world in which refugee women were not trafficked, abused or imprisoned, with their talents refused to be recognised. It would also be a world in which the end of violence against women and girls meant that not only the use of rape as a war crime, but the abuse of women in other areas of conflict, was over. It would be a world in which women and girls were not forced to flee their homelands in the first place, but in which, if they were, we would welcome them and make them safe.

So how do we get there? Government, business, education and so on all have their roles, as we do in this place, but I want us—men and women—to start right here in this room. We can all help to bring about, and benefit from, true gender equality. Women in this place and beyond, I ask you a series of questions. Can you advise, guide, support and encourage other women and girls? Can you be the person who spots a woman’s potential and tells them, because they might not have realised it? Can you take part in any of the many schemes to give women a chance to shadow or be mentored by you? Can you speak out against injustices that are holding women back and keeping women fearful, and stand by your sisters who are affected by those injustices even if you are not—in fact, especially if you are not? Can you recruit male allies and talk to them about why it matters that we live in a world of gender equality and how they, too, can speak out?

Will you always thank those women who have mentored and helped you? Will you let them know, years later, how their advice worked out for you? I want to say thank you to my maths teacher, Mrs Morley, who years and years ago helped me to see that maths was for girls. I also want to thank the many women MPs—too many to mention—particularly my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who I am delighted and slightly nervous to say just in front of me, and Baroness Jean Corston, the former Member for Bristol East, both of whom showed me just how much women MPs can do for women, and in ways that many of those women will never know about. They showed me that that does not matter, because we should not expect a “thank you” note from all the women we might benefit—we should just be glad to have the chance.

While I am at the thanking stage of my speech, I might as well thank all the women in my family, particularly the young women, who challenge me so much, inspire me and make me question my beliefs and think again about my particular form of feminism. I thank all the sisters in the violence against women movement who have helped us to make so much progress from where we were when I started out as a teenager, to where we are now.

I ask all Members to look around our constituencies to see whether we can spot where we are making progress towards that truly great, gender-equal world, and where progress is still stalling—and we need to be honest about that.
Engineers, and the first woman to receive the Lloyd's War Medal for Bravery at Sea for her courage under fire in world war two.

Or, we can talk about Roza Salih, Amal Azzudin, Ewelina Siwak, Emma Clifford, Jennifer McCarron, Toni Henderson and Agnesa Mursela). As schoolgirls, they shook the country, demanding better treatment for child asylum seekers and an end to dawn raids on families. They got movement—the UK Government stopped the policy of detaining children for immigration removal purposes in 2010—but none of them would claim total victory, I think. Those “Glasgow Girls” are all young women now, and it is to be hoped that they will continue to make a difference in their lives and the lives of others. They are already impressive and I hope we hear much, much more about them.

There are legions of women who have proven their ability in many, many fields, and there are many more who are proving that now. Being a woman is not someone’s design error; nor is it a blessing without measure. Women are, quite simply, human beings. All around the world, though, there are examples of women being treated unfairly for the simple crime of being a woman, and we have heard some examples today. I think, though, that we can be too smug in suggesting that that is something that thrives elsewhere and has no foundation here. The “Time’s Up” and #MeToo revelations have shown that sexism is deeply embedded in our culture—that it is seen as simply a part of life and that women are expected just to deal with it.

We see it in this House: a juvenile, grinning idiocy that is sometimes so offensive; the smugness of a minority of men who think that supposedly clever point scoring proves something; an anti-intellectual nonsense that makes this continuing debate so tiring. There are men in this House who have a record of opposing progressive politics, without substantive argument but with plenty of bluster and filibuster, opposing equality as a playground joke. Like others, I am sure, I am tired of engaging with men with so little—so very little—to offer and am pleased that they represent a tiny percentage of the men I encounter.

I encourage all Members to watch the video of the debate on misogyny as a hate crime in Westminster Hall yesterday. If they do, they will see an intervention that illustrates very well what I have just described, but they will also see several excellent and important contributions that are really worth digesting. In particular, I recommend the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black). The direct manner of her speech added a clarity that makes a harsh point so much more effective.

As the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) said in that debate, we seem to have come to a point where very often it is women, rather than men, who are expected to address misogyny. I hope that this year turns that around. I do have hope for Scotland’s politics in that regard. We have a woman First Minister, who is an extremely effective politician, a woman leader of the Opposition in Holyrood and a woman head of our civil service. We have a gender-balanced Cabinet in the Scottish Government already, and a large number of very good women in local government. It is not so much a case that change is coming, more that change is already happening, and Scottish politics is being rebalanced.

In this world where the President of the United States excuses juvenile offensiveness by claiming that it is just the talk in which men indulge in the changing room at gym, and where Members of this House are falling short of decency, leaving the staff of this place feeling unable to raise complaints, it is surely time to clean the stables. I ask all Members to take that on board, as I know that they will.

2.55 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). It is an honour to speak today in this extremely important debate on International Women’s Day. I hope to raise awareness in this House of the significant challenges that still face women in politics in this significant year celebrating 100 years since some women got the vote.

On arriving in Westminster last June, it was quite extraordinary how a group of us became friendly, having realised that we were all in very similar situations. Just one of the common denominators was that we were single parents, elected to Parliament; and the other was that we were women. At least five of us found ourselves thrust from being working single parents to Members of Parliament, practically overnight, but, every day, we are proud to be working-class women standing up for our communities.

I am very proud to be a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, and to be part of the all-party group on single parent families, which will be officially launched on International Single Parents Day on 21 March. In one of my very first conversations with the chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), she said that she had never discussed being a single mother before. It seemed that, in our company, she felt comfortable enough to speak about it. Being a single parent is not a status that people necessarily want to share, as it brings with it a stigma. It would be interesting to know, across this House, how many Members are single parents. It is imperative that we stand together to recognise the challenges that lone parents face every day. In the media, Stacey Solomon has championed being a single mother and taken a lot of criticism for it, but she speaks plainly and openly about the “mummy guilt” that goes with working away from home and with being in the public eye.

There are many challenges that I have experienced since becoming an MP. Balancing family life is not easy. It can be impossible to maintain a relationship and, unfortunately, that is one of the sacrifices that I have had to make. Throughout my working life, I have seen at first hand how many women are juggling balls—I have always been proud of the fact that that is something that I can do, but I have always known that even the most talented jugglers drop a ball. When someone is on their own, when they are the provider; the organisser, the mother, the daughter, the person who people depend on, where do they turn when that ball drops? Sadly, many women return to abusive relationships, go further into debt, or turn to alcohol, drugs or anti-depressants.

A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in July last year shows how single parents on low incomes are being hit so hard by rising living costs and the benefits
freeze. How they cope with the impact of low pay and insecurity is of great concern to me and my colleagues, because, although we have been working in relatively well-paid jobs, we know at first hand that the cost of a divorce or separation is not only financial, but emotional. Only last night, when I should have been preparing this speech, I had chats with two friends who I studied A-levels with—unfortunately, not maths. They are both ambitious and talented women—we have shared a life journey—and both are happily married with three children. One battles daily in her place of work to have her hard work and dedication recognised, and she is too scared to ring her union because she fears a backlash and being seen as a troublemaker. That is not the sort of working environment that we want for women, or for anybody in society, in 2018.

I was telling my friend, in contrast, about our other friend, who lives in Melbourne, Australia. The friend I was speaking to said, “Please don’t tell me about her perfect beach life down under.” Unfortunately, I had to tell her that our friend suffered something similar to a stroke two months ago and has been told that even after intensive physiotherapy, a full recovery is unlikely. Regardless of that, I said to her, “I am sending you strength and love on International Women’s Day.” She told me that her 15-year-old daughter is doing a presentation today to 600 students in her middle school about inspiring women, and that she was going to talk about this famous woman—a teacher, a single mother and a family friend—who followed her dreams so that she could influence change.

On International Women’s Day, I can tell Members that women from all walks of life are fighting a daily battle and desperately trying to hold it together. It is great that the dynamics of this House are changing. Being a female Member of Parliament is incredible, and I am still, and always will be, full of awe and wonder at the privilege. Every woman faces a challenge every day, and the challenges that we face reflect the challenge that our society puts on women every day, from harassment in all its forms to putting food on the table and providing a home for our children.

We have many challenges in getting more women into politics, and we need to identify the barriers in order to make careers in politics more accessible to women. It is at the grassroots of politics that we need to look. I read in The Guardian yesterday that Sarah Childs from Birkbeck, University of London argues that political parties need to think again about how they assess women’s contributions. If long service is a condition of selection, for example, it automatically discriminates against women with caring responsibilities. She called for a rethink of what constitutes a good party member, because the way that is viewed often excludes women. It is well known that I am a latecomer to politics—a relative newbie in the party—and I am glad to say that in my short time in politics, my potential and talent have been recognised in my selection by Welsh Labour.

I often draw comparisons from my time playing rugby. Obviously, I believe that rugby is the best team sport in the world. Rugby union provides a platform for a wide range of players, and that, for me, is the key to a successful team. A successful political team has its forwards and its backs. It draws from a wide range of skills, but, more importantly, it represents society. We have to strive to be a political team that reflects our communities—50:50. The new Labour intake and the new intake across the House in 2017 have brought a new dynamic not just to the Labour party, but to this Parliament. I look forward to us continuing to make a difference to the lives of women in the United Kingdom and across the world.

3.3 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): We have had an excellent debate so far, with some very inspiring speeches about International Women’s Day. I want to spend the time available to me doing some women’s plaining. I want to take stock of how far we have come in gender equality and look back at some amazing ordinary women who have achieved extraordinary changes in our society, but who have often been ignored or written out of history.

I want to tell Members three stories. The first is from July 1888, when 1,400 women at the Bryant and May east end factory went on strike against bullying, low pay and dangerous working conditions, which resulted in many of them developing phosy jaw. The second story is about the June 1968 equal pay dispute by 187 women machinists at Ford in Dagenham. My third story, which is also from 1968, is about the campaign by the Hessle Road women’s committee in Hull, which was led by four great local women: Lily Biloca, Yvonne Blenkinsop, Mary Denness and Christine Jensen. They campaigned to improve safety at sea for trawlermen.

In 1968, Hull was one of the world’s largest fishing ports, but there was a dark side to the industry. A trawlerman was 17 times more likely to die in an industrial accident at sea than the average worker. It was the most dangerous occupation on earth. Six thousand men had died at sea in the years before 1968. When a further 58 trawlermen were lost on the St Romanus, Kingston Peridot and Ross Cleveland trawlers between January and February 1968, it became known as the triple trawler disaster. Those lost were the husbands, the sons, the brothers, the uncles and the nephews of the women in Hull. After the triple trawler disaster, Lily Biloca said, “Enough is enough”, and started a campaign to improve safety for their menfolk.

All three of those stories of determined working women getting organised and taking a stand share three similar characteristics. First, all these women took action that shocked the society of their time and offended some. Each went against the view that women should not have views of their own or the will to take action. At this point, I am thinking of the maxim, “Well-behaved women rarely make history.” In 1888, in late Victorian England, matchwomen were dismissed as little more than ignorant young women, largely of Irish immigrant stock, who were easily astray by outside militant forces.

The 1968 Dagenham women machinists fought as much against the TGWU establishment of the time, tepid at best in any support for equal pay, as much as they fought against the Detroit bosses of Ford. Hull’s headscarf revolutionaries shocked the nation and knocked the Vietnam war off the front pages of newspapers with their 10,000-name petition, their local marches, and their picketing of the dockside. They took the fight to Westminster and met Harold Wilson. They threatened
to picket his private home if their demands to improve safety were not met. They did this in the face of death threats, actual violence, and insults from trawler owners and others. They were described as “hysterical women” and told that they should not get involved in men’s business. This was, of course, all before social media. We know now how threats and insults are used to try to put women down and stop them standing up for the issues that they care about.

Secondly, all these women achieved far more in a very short period of time than men, supposedly campaigning for the same causes, achieved over decades. The 1888 Bow strike lasted only about 14 days, but it resulted in more progress than the men had achieved in decades before. The ripple of change throughout the wider labour movement was even more profound from the matchwomen’s strike, because in the following year we had the 1889 dock strike in east London, spawning more politically active new unionism. As such, I believe that the matchwomen can be described as the founding mothers of the Labour party.

The 1968 Ford Dagenham strike lasted just 21 days. Like the matchwomen and the headscarf revolutionaries in Hull, the women brought their case to Westminster and won. As a result of this strike, Labour’s Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity—the wonderful, the marvellous Barbara Castle—introduced the Equal Pay Act 1970. Although we all know in this House that the battle for equal pay goes on, the Dagenham women overturned decades of stalling on pay equality.

In Hull, as one of the headscarf revolutionaries, Mary Denness, said, they had “achieved more in six weeks than the politicians and trade unions have in years.” Their campaign persuaded the Government to adopt their demands in the fishermen’s charter, which meant full crewing of ships, radio operators on board every ship, improved weather forecasting, better training, more safety equipment, and a mother ship with medical facilities to accompany the fleet. Those ordinary yet extraordinary Hull women, led by Lily Bilocca, a cod skinner on the docks, saved thousands of men’s lives by their short campaign of direct action.

Thirdly, all the victories won by those women were then obscured in the history books for decades and even written out. The 1888 Bow matchwomen, though recognised by leading trade unionists at the time, were soon written down. The 1888 Bow matchwomen’s strike, because in the following year we had the 1889 dock strike in east London, was downplayed in its significance. Many claim the strike was led by a more establishment figure, Annie Besant, who I think people would describe as the Polly Toynbee of State for Employment and Productivity—the wonderful, the marvellous Barbara Castle—introduced the Equal Pay Act 1970. Although we all know in this House that the battle for equal pay goes on, the Dagenham women overturned decades of stalling on pay equality.

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The real names of the strike leaders—Alice Francis, Kate Slater, Mary Driscoll, Jane Wakeling and Eliza Martin—were finally published in Louise Raw’s brilliant book published in 2009, “Striking a Light”. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) first read those names out in Parliament in 2013. The story of the 1968 Dagenham Ford women slipped from view for decades, until the 2010 film “Made in Dagenham” raised its profile again. It is a delight that some of those original women have now had the recognition they deserve in their lifetime.

I want to conclude by returning to the story of the headscarf revolutionaries. Events in 1968 in Hull faded from popular culture, partly due to the post cod war decline of the local fishing industry, but also because of some frankly very outdated views about women in the city. Lily Bilocca, who led the headscarf revolutionaries, was sacked after the campaign, blacklisted and told she would never work in the fishing industry again. She was out of work for two years, eventually finding work in a nightclub cloakroom. She died at the age of 59 in 1988, and there was no public recognition by the people or the city of Hull of the pivotal role she had played in helping to protect the lives and improve the safety of trawlermen.

Despite that huge victory for safer working conditions, before today Lily Bilocca’s name has only ever been mentioned in this House once, on 25 March 1969 by a local Hull MP, James Johnson—no relation—and, sadly, just in passing. There was no proper recognition of or tribute to what she and those other women did, so it was great to see the story of the headscarf revolutionaries brought back to life in Brian Lavery’s 2015 book “The Headscarf Revolutionaries” and more recently the excellent BBC 4 programme based on his book, as we this year mark the 50th anniversary of the triple trawler disaster.

Interestingly, Hull has granted freedom of the city to many notable citizens over the years, but I have discovered that since 1885, when that honour could first be bestowed, of 47 recipients only two have been women—that is 45 men and only two women. Regrettably for the pioneering city of Hull, one of our most famous daughters, Amy Johnson, did not make that list and did not receive freedom of the city. In fact, we waited more than 100 years for the first woman to receive the freedom of the city of Hull. Janet Suzman, a wonderful anti-apartheid campaigner, received the award in 1987, and then we waited another 30 years before Jean Bishop, a lady in her 90s who has raised more than £100,000 for Age UK, was given the honour of freedom of the city at the end of last year.

Today, along with the other two Hull MPs, I am calling on Hull City Council to honour the leading women of the Hessle Road women’s committee by making them all freewomen of Hull. Fifty years after the triple trawler disaster, Hull needs to properly recognise these women. We have had wonderful theatre plays and murals for the women in the city, but we need to make sure that they get the tribute they really deserve.

As the headscarf revolutionaries achieved change both locally in the fishing industry and nationally in health and safety practices, they should be recognised nationally too. That is why all three Hull MPs are backing Ian Cuthbert’s campaign for Yvonne Blenkinsop, who is sadly the only surviving member of the headscarf revolutionaries, to receive an honour. It is just not on for these wonderful heroines from Hull to be overlooked any longer. In Lily Bilocca’s own words, “Enough is enough,” it is time to act now.

3.15 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak in today’s debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), and to have heard about the work that very ordinary woman can do in changing the world. It is a privilege to join right hon. and hon. Members in celebrating International Women’s Day, the first of which was celebrated in 1911. I want to start by reflecting on the progress in rights and opportunities for women across the United Kingdom since then.
I was delighted to join Members from across the House to mark the centenary last month of the Representation of the People Act 1918. Not only did the legislation give some women the vote in parliamentary elections for the first time, but it enabled Nancy Astor to become the first woman to take her seat in this House 18 months later. This goes to show that, even 100 years ago, when opportunities are opened up to women, they take them and succeed. From then on, a whole range of possibilities opened up for women—from the first female Cabinet Minister in 1929 to our first female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, in 1979 and the first female Speaker in 1992. Although such achievements are to be celebrated, the fact is that there are still Cabinet positions that have never been held by a woman, and this shows that progress is still needed.

When I was elected as the MP for Cheadle in 2015, I became the 445th woman to take my seat in this House. I welcome the fact that, since we celebrated International Women's Day last year, the number of female MPs has risen yet further—to a record 208, or almost one third of this place. The ratio of female representation here is often compared with that of Parliaments around the world, but it is worthy of note that last year's general election saw this House overtake Germany's Parliament in the representation of women. I am honoured to be the second woman to represent Cheadle, and I would like to take this opportunity to recognise the role of Patsy Calton, who in 2001 became the first woman to represent Cheadle. Even though it is 13 years since she passed away, she is still mentioned on the doorstep and remembered for her hard work.

At a local level, women in councils up and down the country do a great job and are inspirational role models for others. I particularly want to note the wonderful example set by the Mayor of Stockport, Councillor Linda Holt. Linda has represented the community of Bramhall for 10 years, and has used her time this year as Mayor to support a variety of causes, such as local animal welfare charities, as well as the historic Plaza Theatre, of which she is a board member. Indeed, she was delighted to present Kingsway School with an award. I strongly agree with Alun Jones, head of the Girls' School Association, that girls can be encouraged to "think like a scientist" in the right environment and through exposure to scientific roles. As he said: “We're dealing with centuries of gender bias and what people and parents think and say, often without realising it, does influence children's expectations of themselves.”

However, although progress is undoubtedly needed in many areas, we have a huge amount to be proud of from the past 12 months alone. Since last year's International Women's Day, we have witnessed the appointment of the first ever female President of the Supreme Court, Baroness Hale, and the first female Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Cressida Dick. Women have enjoyed similar progress in our armed forces in the past 12 months: last April the first female Army officer was commissioned into a close combat regiment, and last September the RAF lifted its ban on women serving in close combat roles. Those are a few key examples of women flourishing in roles that were once the preserve of men, and that bodes extremely well for the future.

Before I conclude I wish to mention an initiative in Stockport, where the 100th anniversary of women gaining the vote is being marked by naming the town's newest public area Suffragette Square. The council asked the people of Stockport to come up with a name for a new square, and after reviewing more than 1,500 entries from the public, the panel decided on Suffragette Square to celebrate the achievements of four Stockport women. Elizabeth Raffald, Gertrude Powicke, Elsie Plant and Hannah Winbolt were all Stopfordian women who were
active in the suffrage movement, and they were nominated by members of the public in the light of this year’s commemoration. I firmly believe that although progress is still needed, we must move on and welcome the achievements of all women, and help them come forward and be recognised for the work they do.

3.23 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) and to take part in this debate. As a proud member of the Labour party in a Parliament where 32% of MPs are women—the majority of them, 57%, from my party—I know that we still have work to do to achieve true equality in gender representation, but the Labour party is heading the right direction. I am pleased that some male MPs have been, and still are, in the Chamber. I have enjoyed their contributions, particularly that of the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), who regrettably is no longer in his place.

International Women’s Day is for everyone to celebrate, and it is important that men have an understanding of inequality in our society. I welcome their thoughts, and most certainly would not dream of accusing any one of them of mansplaining.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): On that point—[Laughter] I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. Does she not agree that it is the collective responsibility of all of us—not just women, but men too—to ensure that we have equality in all senses of the word? With regard to Parliament, she rightly says that the Labour party has managed to get 45% of the parliamentary Labour party as women. For the House of Commons as a whole to have only 32% of Members as women is just not good enough.

Liz McInnes: I thank my hon. Friend for that point, which he has made very well. He is absolutely right: this is our collectively responsibility, and 32% is not good enough. We also need to look at equality in other representations in addition to gender balance. He makes a very good point, which I would in no way ever describe as mansplaining.

It was heartbreaking today to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) recite the names of all those women who have died at the hands of men. Sadly, one of them, Linda Parker, was from my constituency. My heart goes out to her friends, family, children and grandchildren. I dream of a future International Women’s Day when my hon. Friend no longer has a list of the names of murdered women to recite, and when the figure of two women murdered every week by a current or former partner has become history due to better investment in women’s refuges, women’s safety and a complete change in attitudes.

Today is International Women’s Day. It was my pleasure yesterday to attend the launch of a report commissioned by the all-party group on population, development and reproductive health, of which I am an active member. The report is entitled, “Who Decides? We Trust Women” and concerns abortion in the developing world and the UK. I pay tribute to the chair of the all-party group, Baroness Jenny Tonge, for her tireless work. As a retired GP, she really knows her subject and demonstrates the value that can be brought to the other place by experts in their field. The report makes the important point that from 2010 to 2014, one in four pregnancies worldwide ended in an abortion. Abortion rates have been declining in the developed world since 1990, but the rate in developing countries has remained fairly constant.

An estimated 56 million abortions occur worldwide each year, with three quarters taking place among married women. Significantly, abortion rates are roughly the same in countries where abortion is legally restricted and those where it is liberally available. Restrictive abortion laws do not prevent women from seeking abortion; they only endanger women’s health and lives as women seek unsafe procedures. There is a clear correlation between restrictive abortion laws and higher rates of maternal morbidity and mortality. In the group of countries where abortion is completely banned or allowed in very narrow circumstances, three out of four abortions are unsafe. Lack of money prevents women and girls from accessing safe abortions in the private sector. In addition, fear of being reported to the police prevents women and girls from seeking medical attention when they are faced with life-threatening complications due to unsafe abortions.

The report makes the important point that more family planning will reduce abortion worldwide. Family planning is one of the most cost-effective strategies to prevent maternal deaths and suffering from unsafe abortion. Indeed, the lowest rates of abortion in the world can be found in Germany and Switzerland, where family planning is widely and easily available. Yet only last week I heard from Marie Stopes International that due to President Trump’s global gag, which blocks US funds going to any organisation involved in abortion advice and care overseas, its funding has been cut drastically, severely restricting its ability to provide contraceptive services to women and girls in the developing world. The international campaign SheDecides says that every girl and every woman has the right to do what she chooses with her body. She must have access to education and information about her body and her options, modern contraception and safe abortion. Only when women are in control of their own fertility will they have control over their own lives.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her thoughtful speech, and she is absolutely right. Those of us who, many years ago, marched and took to the streets to protect the Abortion Act 1967 and ensure that it was not in any way interfered with did so because we knew about the extremely important point that she is making. It was not because we wanted people to have terminations of pregnancies; it was all about women having a right of control over their bodies. That is about empowerment, a lack of prejudice, their freedom and a lack of discrimination.

Liz McInnes: The right hon. Lady makes an excellent point. We have to allow women the world over to control their own bodies and therefore their own lives. However, there is still much work to be done, both nationally and internationally. Today, on International Women’s Day, I call upon our female Prime Minister to call on President Trump to reverse the global gagging order. A woman Prime Minister who is prepared to stand up for women around the world would do that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Dr Stella Creasy.
3.31 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker—it is wonderful to see the number of men who are in the Chamber for this debate growing exponentially as we continue, in whatever role.

So many Members have made fantastic speeches, talking about the past and what we have achieved, but I want to honour International Women's Day in the way that I feel is best. I consider International Women's Day to be feminist Christmas; it is about what goodies and actions are coming. I want to talk about that because we need to learn from what the suffragettes drummed into all of us: deeds, not words, make a difference. Even when there were men who claimed to care for women's rights and for the future of women, they knew that it was not enough to have them speak for them. The true deed was to have true and equal representation.

We must learn that lesson today as we continue to look at the inequalities in our world. It is simply not enough to pay lip service to equality. It is not enough to march and to use the hashtag. I am struck when I go into shops such as Hennes that people can now buy plenty of t-shirts that say, “Female Equals Future”. But we would only have a more equal future when we have deeds, and when we actually tackle the barriers to discrimination and the inequality that holds 51% of our population back.

In perhaps being the Grinch of feminist Christmas, I am inspired by Mary Wollstonecraft, who said:

“My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone.”

When we view the world as it is and are rational creatures, we see that if the call is to push for progress, we are not making the progress that we think we are and its pace is agonisingly slow. We are celebrating 100 years since some women got the vote, and we have talked about the fact that we have now achieved a 30% share of this Parliament for women. A whole 12 extra women were elected at the last general election. If we carry on at that trajectory, we will need another 14 general elections to achieve parity. I know that we have been having elections more frequently than we used to, but we need more appropriate action.

It is not just national Government where we fail to make the progress that we want. The hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) rightly pointed out the progress in local government. I am proud that we have one of the few female leaders in local government in my borough, Clare Coghill, the new leader of Waltham Forest Council—the first woman to be elected there. Only 17% of council leaders in this country are women. We would need 12,000 women to stand for election if we were to achieve the extra 3,000 who would give us parity in local government.

We know that this country continues to fail what I shall now call the Piers Morgan test. This morning, Piers Morgan tweeted that the fact that there were six women in positions of responsibility in the country meant that the country was run by women. Job done: we can all go home. The point is that such women are still too often the exception rather the rule. That is why we can name them. True equality will come when there are so many women from so many backgrounds in those positions that it is simply the norm, and the fact is that we are nowhere near the norm. Only 11% of surgeons in this country are women—it will take 100 years to achieve parity—and only 24% of judges are women. Why do we never hear about all this? I would wager that it is because only 34% of people in senior roles in our press are women.

Too often we tell ourselves that because we have seen one woman, there must be more behind her; but the truth is that this country is still agonisingly behind where it needs to be to realise the potential of all its people. We see that not least in the arguments that we are having about equal and, indeed, fair pay. The equal pay legislation is older than I am, but we still have to explain to the young women coming into our workforce that there is a 14% gap—and, yes, it is growing for their generation. This is not just about women having children. Women ask for pay rises just as often as men, but men are four times as likely to get them. We are starting at lower salaries, and that inequality is continuing and is not being reduced.

Companies facing gender pay gap reporting are now hiding behind each other. I welcome the legislation: we all fought for it, and we can see the cleansing effect that it is starting to have. However, we know that only 1,200 of 9,000 companies have declared their data so far, and we know that the deadline is fast approaching. That tells us that plenty of companies are waiting until the very end, hoping that they can find cover in each other. Let us send a strong message today, on International Women's Day: “It does not matter whether you publish today, or whether you all publish together. We will look at every single set of data, and we will hold to account every single company that does not offer equal pay.”

We must also, as a House, speak up for the right to talk about equal pay. As we have seen at the BBC, when women start asking questions, they get shut down. Freedom of speech in the workplace is a fundamental human right, and the legislation relies on the principle that we can start to have such conversations. We must not give an inch on the idea that it is acceptable for managers to tell employees that if they start asking those questions, they will be labelled difficult and it might harm their chances of promotion. It is what we might call the John Humphrys test.

Anna Soubry: Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the problems is the fact that we do not have as many trade unions operating in as many workplaces? I used to be the mother of the chapel when I worked at Central Television, which was obviously a very long time ago. One of the things that shop stewards do is to act on behalf of all their members when, as sometimes happens, they are fearful of stepping up to say the sort of things that the hon. Lady rightly identifies. If we had better, more democratic, more open trade unions, that would go a long way towards advancing the cause of women.

Stella Creasy: I completely agree. Let me put on record that if I were ever to face problems in my workplace, I would certainly hope that the hon. Lady would act as shop steward.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): And vice versa—[Laughter.]
Stella Creasy: I know that the hon. Lady would fight the good fight. She is absolutely right: this is about representation and voice, and we see the impact of women not having that voice.

This is not just about gender; it is also about ethnicity. We know when we talk about inequalities in pay that our sisters from the black and ethnic minority communities face even higher differentials, and we, as a country, are a long way from knowing how to tackle that. I welcome the initiative from my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), who said, “It is not enough to have data—we need to see what you are going to do about it.” It is clear from the data that we have already seen from only 1,200 companies how far we have to go.

This is also not just about the major companies. We know that 62% of people earning less than the living wage are women. It is about persistent poverty pay, and what it does to families around the country. It is little wonder that one of the themes of the debate that we have started to have in 2018 is period poverty. All too often, women are trying to pick up the pieces of a failing economy in an institutionally unequal society. What does that mean? It means that women are often the ones trying to make the difference, and it is the men who, like Piers Morgan, simply say, “I’ve seen one of you do it. If one of you can do it, all of you can do it.”

We see that nowhere more than when we try to tackle violence against women. The writer Margaret Atwood said:

“Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them.”

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) set out so clearly, that is still a challenge for us in our society. Violence against women is endemic; the #MeToo movement has started a conversation about something that has been part of our society for generations. It is just a conversation, and we have not yet seen the real change—the real progress—we know we need to make. When 85,000 women report being raped, and 400,000 report sexual assaults, we know that that is just the tip of the iceberg. Then there are the 12,000 honour-based violence crimes and the 135,000 women and girls living with female genital mutilation. That only 15% of these crimes get reported is not about the women, but about the society we are right now; and about our failure to understand these crimes and prosecute them, and to support the people affected by them.

As part of dealing with that, I very much welcome the Government’s commitment to ratifying the Istanbul convention, but one of the things I want to do today is to hold the Government to account for deeds not words. If we are going to ratify the Istanbul convention, we have to right a long-standing wrong. I pay tribute to the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who made a powerful speech about the importance of women’s reproductive rights, because women’s reproductive rights are human rights. I want to put on record my gratitude to every one of the parliamentarians who has signed the letter to the Minister for Women and Equalities calling for us to give equal access to abortion for women in Northern Ireland.

Members may say, “A year ago, we decided to provide funding to help women from Northern Ireland to travel to England to have an abortion.” The figures we have today show that 600 women have taken part in that scheme—clearly, there is a demand. But it is little wonder that the United Nations says very clearly that the way we treat Northern Irish women—by making them travel, and by putting that restriction on a human right—is degrading and inhuman. We cannot ratify the Istanbul convention unless we right that wrong. That treatment is inhuman. Not everybody can travel. We are treating women in one part of the United Kingdom differently—the women who cannot travel, the women in coercive relationships, the women who have small children and the women who are undocumented.

We cannot leave this to chance. We cannot say, “Because we can give you some ability to travel, that means you have equal access.” We cannot let whatever deal the Government may have needed to do with the DUP allow us to get away with arguing that women’s rights are devolved, especially when the Government have committed to giving us a vote on same-sex marriage. Equality cannot be selective. It is right that people should be able to love who they love and to record that in the way they want to, and it is right that women should be given control over their bodies and not be forced to continue an unwanted pregnancy.

I say to Ministers that these things are there in the Istanbul convention. We are treating citizens of this nation with contempt and in a way that the UN called degrading. If we are not going to have a free vote on the domestic violence Bill, which is supposed to ratify the convention, when will we have parity? When will we treat equality as what it truly is—that equality as what it truly is? If we want to show solidarity with our Northern Irish friends and their right to marry who they want, we should show solidarity with our Northern Irish sisters in giving them back control over their bodies.

I also want to echo the call by my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton on the global gag rule, but I would go further. On International Women’s Day, the deed that we need is for this Government to commit to contribute to the SheDecides fund. It is one thing to face Donald Trump and his decision to withdraw funding—we know that women have died in the last year because they have not been able to access maternal healthcare following the funding cut he made to stop abortion services—but it is another thing when other countries step up to the plate and say, “We will bridge the gap.” However, this country shies away from being part of that fund.

This is not just about the money; it is about the message of solidarity it sends when we are part of the SheDecides fund. I call on the Government not simply to tell Donald Trump that he is wrong to cut this funding, but to put our money where our mouth is and to stand with our sisters around the world who need the services that his withdrawal of money has cut.

We have also today had the wonderful Women for Refugee Women organisation in Committee Room 10. I am sure that they are still up there singing, and I hope that Members will go up and join them. They are singing for their sisters who are in Yarl’s Wood. In 2018, we in this country are not making the progress we think we are if we are still locking up women who have been the victims of violence, sexual abuse and torture in conflict, yet that is exactly what we are doing in Yarl’s Wood. The fact that 75% of the women in Yarl’s Wood are set free, sometimes to be detained again and then set free again, tells us that the system is broken. This
expensive system enshrines inequality in the way in which we treat the most vulnerable women in our society, and I urge Ministers to rethink their determination that this is the only way to manage our immigration system.

Like many of us, the lessons that I take on International Women’s Day are from my constituents, and I want to share two quick stories. In 1962, Beryl Swain was the first woman to compete in motorbike racing on the Isle of Man. The men were so horrified that they changed the weight categories to prevent women from taking part, and that continued until 1978. Karpal Kaur Sandhu was the first Asian female police officer in the world, and she proudly served Walthamstow. She was murdered by her husband in 1973 because he disapproved of her job. What that tells us is that the backlash, the power, the abuse and the violence will always mutate.

We have to keep fighting the patriarchy, and in that sense, that is why I am proud to see so many men here today, including the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman). In creating these deeds, men have a vital role to play. As we have all tried to remind Piers Morgan, we do not think that all men are violent. This is about standing up for the reputation of men and for the better world that men and women working together as equals can create, and we ask men now to be our allies and to show solidarity. This is also about cold, hard economic logic. More equal societies are more prosperous, more resilient and more diverse. The right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), who is no longer in the Chamber, said that the equal employment of men and women would create $28 trillion in growth, from which we could all benefit.

That is why I say to the men in this Chamber and the men in Britain: do not leave it to the women of Britain to resolve these problems. Do not expect us to lead this fight on our own and to come up with all the solutions and the deeds. Do not tell us that you do not think that quotas work or that you do not think that turning misogyny into a hate crime is a good thing. Tell us what you will do to create an equal society. We all have a responsibility to come up with deeds, not words. I will end with the words of Millicent Fawcett, who said:

“What draws men and women together is stronger than the brutality and tyranny which drive them apart.”

I will champion the contribution that every one of my constituents, male and female, makes to this country, but I know that only a truly equal society will realise that for all of them. On International Women’s Day, I call on every man and woman in this country to ensure that we have not just one day of fighting for that better world, but 365 days of fighting for it. Truly, it is worth it for all of us.

3.48 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a real honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who has a fantastic record in this place of standing up for women. I particularly thank her for her comments on Mary Wollstonecraft. I understand that as a result of her campaigning and that of other Members on both sides of the House, there is now a plan to have a statue of Mary Wollstonecraft.

Well done to my hon. Friend for putting on record the proud history of that woman in our tradition of freedom and equality.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. May I draw the attention of the House to another great hero? Eleanor Rathbone was probably the most important Back-Bench Member of this House since William Wilberforce. She was a towering figure on all fronts, and an early-day motion has been tabled proposing that we should name a Committee Room of the House after her. That motion also bears the name of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman). In the light of the speech that we have just heard, naming a Committee Room is perhaps a small thing, but this is about keeping alive the memory of people who, in their own lifetime, made a real mega-difference.

Catherine West: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), whose name appears on that EDM, has done such amazing work in this place, and I read her fantastic book when it was hot off the press. I also enjoyed the book of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who somehow found time to write a book while being an MP. Both of those stories, histories or records remind us about the struggles. So much in politics just appears to happen, but we understand just how hard the struggles are.

As I mentioned my hon. Friend. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley, I want to thank her for mentioning Juliana Tudos, who tragically lost her life in Finsbury Park, which is on the borders of Hackney, Haringey and Islington. She was my constituent and lost her life in a terrible way, and we think of her family, because things must be terrible for her parents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles and so on. Not only do they live abroad, but they know that that young woman lost her life in a violent way.

The seat of Hornsey and Wood Green has been held by women since 1992. Many Members here will remember Lynne Featherstone, who is now in the other House and continues her campaigning for women. Barbara Roche, who I am sure Mr Deputy Speaker remembers, represented my constituency from 1992 until 2005. She won the seat from a Tory Member, Hugh Rossi, and is therefore very famous in Hornsey and Wood Green. She is a barrister and a great advocate for newly arrived communities. When chair of Metropolitan, the housing association, she was a great advocate of affordable housing, and that goes to the heart of the housing crisis, which has worsened since her time as a Member.

It is of course fantastic to be giving this speech with the lovely plaque that the House put up for Jo Cox MP just behind me, and we must not forget our dear friend on a day like today. She would have been hopping up and making an important speech, and we would all have been listening because she was extremely eloquent.

Not wanting to make this a counsel of despair—I have certainly talked about many sad things in the past couple of minutes—I want to note that it has been 100 years since the vote was given to certain women, and suffrage for women was so beautifully depicted in the film directed by Sarah Gavron, whose family is
famous in Hornsey and Wood Green. Nicky Gavron is a former deputy Mayor of London and is still on the London Assembly, and she and her daughter are both great feminists.

I want to refer to the recent work in the creative arts sector following the terrible Weinstein scandal and the lurid tales that have emerged since the extent of the sexual abuse within that industry was uncovered. I am wearing a badge that was given to me by my great-aunt, who ran the Italia Conti Academy in London for many years and passed away at the age 101 two years ago. She knew some suffragettes in her time, and the badge has “AFL” on it, which stands for the Actresses’ Franchise League. At drama schools in those days, many talented youngsters—this is not just about women, but young people as well—were put on the stage, but their welfare was not particularly considered and they were not particularly well looked after. Young children who loved dancing, acting and so on would often end up on stage in the west end, and my great-aunt noted that they needed much better welfare and protection. Italia Conti and others introduced several positive schemes for the welfare of children in the arts, and I wonder whether we should have stuck a little closer to some of the schemes that forward-thinking women introduced around 1900 to 1930, and even on into the ’60s and ’70s. The creative industries seem to have lost their way slightly, and that needs to be looked at again in the light of the Weinstein tragedies.

The wonderful thing about speaking at the end of the debate is that one can enjoy listening to others. I was so pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) talk about her experience, and how Bangladesh was born out of conflict. She managed to get across the feelings of all of us in the House about the terrible sexual violence in the Rohingya community, and the importance of highlighting subjects that is difficult to discuss in this House.

Similarly, my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) talked about the women in Yarl’s Wood. I am very aware of the issue, having spoken with Baroness Corston in the other House about the experience of women who are not subject to immigration detention, but are detained in our prisons, which are often not up to scratch; they face very difficult conditions. On International Women’s Day, it is fitting that we remember those women and what they go through.

Before I came to the House this morning, I was at Woodside High School, which has given me badges to pass on to the Speaker’s Office. The school is run by two fantastic women, who job-share the post of headteacher. It is a miracle school; it was, once upon a time, famous for not being so great, and now it is one of those fantastic schools. I will give the badges to you shortly, Mr Deputy Speaker. My favourite one says: “I run like a girl—try to keep up”. I thought you might like that one. It was fantastic to see so many young women asking about politics, being interested and wanting to get involved.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) talked about the trade union culture. When I was a council leader, it was always easier to protect the rights of the bin men than to promote the rights of our dinner ladies and others who worked in traditionally female roles. I could not get away with not mentioning Mary Turner, whose memorial service was held in no less a place than St Paul’s cathedral. She broke every single glass ceiling, and she was a huge inspiration to many of us here. Her first battle in the workplace was to get Marigold gloves, so that women did not have to do the washing up without them. She said that that was one of the hardest battles; after that, she became quite battle-hardened. She went on to be president of a union and to play an extremely important role in promoting equality in the trade union movement, and of course in Parliament; that is one of the fantastic ways in which people come into Parliament.

Mr Dhesi: It is so important for young women to have inspirational role models, particularly women from ethnic minority backgrounds—people such as Sophia Duleep Singh, one of the original suffragettes and, in my Slough constituency, Lydia Simmons, who was the first ever lady mayor of African-Caribbean origin. It is important that we in Parliament celebrate those individuals, so that they can continue to inspire others. Would my hon. Friend agree?

Catherine West: I would indeed. I should also like to mention the important contribution that so many women from all over the Commonwealth in particular have made to our NHS over the years. Even now, we see the importance of that workplace. One of the debates that we are having about Brexit is, of course, about the workforce. I was in the Whittington hospital this morning, talking to staff there about their important roles, not just as obstetricians or specialists, but even at the level of our cleaning staff. The NHS does such a fantastic job of promoting women and bringing them through; it is a truly equal workplace where many women from different backgrounds manage to get to the top.

I will conclude, as time is short and people are keen to get back to their constituencies. We heard about equality in sport. It was a fantastic occasion when the Arsenal ladies won and were given the freedom of the borough back in 2008. That was a favourite speech that I got to make at borough level. I will hand those badges over to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, so that the girls at Woodside High School know that you have those for the Speaker’s Office; you can pass them around.

This has been a fantastic debate. There has been nobody sat at the back moaning. On previous occasions, we have had to make the case for a debate—on, for example, the Istanbul convention. It is lovely that this time, it has been in Government time, and that we have got to an accepted level of equality.

4 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): I am delighted and proud to be making my debut at this Dispatch Box to close this debate on behalf of Her Majesty’s Opposition. We have heard today about how we have record female employment in this country, but, as the Secretary of State rightly said, this is not just about getting in—it is about getting on. I could not agree more, which is why I am so pleased to see Labour’s announcement that we will ask business to take a more proactive approach. Under a Labour Government, the onus would be on employers to close the gender pay gap, and provide action plans or face fines. We have heard agreement from Members from across the House that while we all celebrate the centenary of women gaining the vote,
there remains plenty more to be done. It is reassuring to hear the Secretary of State’s pledges to tackle the gender pay gap and to make sure that funding for women’s refuges is protected.

The first Back-Bench speaker, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who chairs the Women and Equalities Committee, is a determined, passionate advocate for equality. She has worked extremely hard to open doors and discuss issues that have never been tackled head on. I was inspired by her as a member of that Committee and continue to follow its work closely. The right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) said that gender inequality represents the biggest waste of talent. She also mentioned the sustainable development goals—as did my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali)—and our need to help stop FGM and health inequality, reminding us of the “International” in International Women’s Day. We have to help our sisters across the globe, while continuing to ask ourselves difficult questions about our own gender balance in this place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) spoke powerfully and moved the House with her list of murdered women. Every one of those women should be here today and it is our absolute duty to make sure they are never forgotten. The hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow talked of the horrors of war, and women facing rape or being trafficked and sold as sex slaves. The first female Member for Coventry, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher), told us that although we now have 208 women in Parliament, that is still only 32% of the House. It was also lovely to hear about her mother, who inspired her to enter politics.

Other Members spoke about the girl guide movement. We heard further great contributions from the hon. Members for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), for Errewash (Maggie Throup) and for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), and from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire). My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) talked about maternity leave, and we all owe a huge debt of gratitude to the Mother of the House, who has tirelessly battled for our rights in this area for decades.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi)—my good friend—spoke about the new all-party group on single parent families, which a few of us have set up. I am a proud founder member. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) told us of those amazing working women who helped to forge the union movement and the Labour party. We also heard further contributions from the hon. Members for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) and for Cheadle (Mary Robinson), and my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) who spoke of the dangers of restricted abortion laws leading to serious and life-threatening harm to women.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) called International Women’s Day “feminist Christmas”, but called for “deeds” not “words”. She said that the course of progress is agonisingly slow. She also mentioned period poverty, a cause on which we are fighting on this side of the House. We finished by hearing from my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who were calling for us to commemorate those women who gave so much to our fight for equality.

What a year it has been for women! We have seen the #MeToo movement, the fabulous Megan Markle, the inspiring Jacinda Ardern and more recently—last week—the #AskHerToStand campaign, which I understand is partly what led us to having the hon. Lady in this place? It is a brilliant campaign, and everyone in this House and outside it can do this, in order to improve the representation of women. When they see women who are doing a brilliant job in the community and who would be amazing elected representatives, they should ask them to stand.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I commend the hon. Lady on her first outing at the Dispatch Box, and I will be joining her to speak at that event. Will she say a word about the importance of campaigns such as the 50:50 Parliament and, in particular, its #AskHerToStand campaign, which we know that there is just not enough representation, as she said. Everyone has been called for, at least one or two men—I am afraid to say—always ask why we need equal representation. The answer is simple: women make up 51% of the country’s population, and we need to see that here on these Benches. It is that simple as far as I am concerned. I will be attending that event later on, and I am an ambassador for that campaign.

We need women in the home and in the house—this House. We need to stand up and say, “I am proud of my gender, I am proud of my mother, I am proud of my daughter, I am proud.” With that, I will say a very simple happy International Women’s Day to men and women.

4.5 pm

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): It is a genuine pleasure to be here for today’s debate, and may I follow in the excellent footsteps of my shadow number—that’s all I’m saying! I would like to thank everyone who has attended the debate and contributed.
We are fortunate to have so many great advocates for gender equality in the Chamber. They have all done so much, in their own ways, to improve the lives of women and girls.

This debate has, of course, had its serious—indeed, its heartbreaking—moments, and I will address those in due course, but before I do let us reflect on the reasons to celebrate. Many Members highlighted the notable women and women's charities in their constituencies both today and in history. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) gave a fascinating and detailed speech on the history of women protesting to improve working conditions and mentioned Lily Bilbocca as someone who had been named only once before in this House—well, I have now named her at the Dispatch Box, which I hope goes some way to addressing that inequality.

This year being the centenary of women's suffrage, many Members focused on the women in the House before them and on other political role models. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) told us that her political hero was Mo Mowlam because of the valuable work that great lady did to bring Protestants and Catholics together in the cause of peace. The hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) told us about her mother, who swept to power on Coventry Council in 1979. Then we had a little competition. The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) told us that her constituency had been represented by women for 21 years, but I am sorry to say that my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) was able to boast that her constituency had been represented by women for 26 years. The more of these competitions that go on, the better.

We have also heard from many Members about the role that the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) has played in inspiring so many women to stand for Parliament. In her role as the Mother of the House, she will this year be celebrating many moments in the history of women’s suffrage. It will be a joy to celebrate those with her.

I would also like to add to the list, however, because I am not the first female Member of Parliament for Louth and Horncastle. I was preceded by a lady called Margaret Wintringham, who was elected in 1921. She was the second-ever female Member of Parliament and the first-ever female MP born in this country. I feel privileged to follow her, albeit many, many decades later. In 1921, she was talking about equal pay, and of course, depressingly, several decades later we are still talking about equal pay. There is, though, one way in which we have moved forward since Mrs Wintringham campaigned to become a Member of Parliament, and that is in the way we conduct general election campaigns: apparently, Mrs Wintringham did not utter a word on the election trail in 1921. I must say that I have taken a very different approach to running my campaigns.

I have been really impressed by the determination in all parts of the House of Commons to encourage women to stand for Parliament and in local council elections. My hon. Friend the Member for Chesh (Mary Robinson) highlighted the fact that only 17% of council leaders are female. We must improve that figure, because we know how valuable female councillors can be throughout the country.

The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) used a phrase that very much captured my attention when she talked about “having the audacity to stand”. We should all be more audacious in that regard.

This morning, I was asked by a journalist about challenges I have faced in politics. I had to tell him about one occasion in 2015 when I was canvassing on the doorstep. I knocked on the door and said to the lady, “May I count on your support?”, and she said, “No.” I said, “Why’s that?”, and she said, “Because you’re a woman.” I did not really know what I could do to change that, so quickly moved on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes set out her ambitions for the next 100 years; they are ambitions to which I am sure we can all subscribe.

Of course, no discussion of a determination to improve equality in this place could pass without my mentioning the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Msiller). Not only as a Member of Parliament, but as a Cabinet Minister and now as Chairman of the Women and Equalities Committee, she has done an incredible amount to ensure equality, and not just for women but for same-sex couples, too. I hope I am correct in paraphrasing her speech as, “Being a Member of Parliament is the best job in the world.” I hope that this year we will all encourage women to think about standing for Parliament.

The award for avoiding mansplaining must go to the only man who made a speech in this debate, as opposed to intervening: my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman). I must say, echoing the comments made by others from all parties, that we are lucky to have male colleagues like him in the House, supporting our cause.

Let me turn to the serious aspects of the debate. Of course, I must start with the contribution of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who, as she has in years past, read out the names of women who have been killed since last year’s International Women’s Day. I join others in wishing fervently that we will be able to have a day of celebrating women when the hon. Lady does not have to read out that list.

Home should of course be a place of love, support and safety. No one should have to suffer violence or abuse, which is why we have today launched the consultation on domestic abuse. We are seeking to transform the country’s approach to domestic abuse. We are widening the definition so that we understand that abuse is not confined to physical violence, but can include psychological violence and economic abuse. We are addressing it at every stage, where we can, the fact that we need to intervene earlier, to support the women and children who are victims of this terrible abuse and, where possible, to break the cycle of violence with the offender. In short, we want the question to change from, “Why doesn’t she leave him?” to “Why doesn’t he stop?”

I very much hope that Members from all parties will contribute to the consultation and use their networks to encourage others to contribute, too, so that we can ensure that the Bill that follows, and all the non-legislative measures, are as ambitious and brave as we can make them.

We have heard much discussion about women in work. The stand-out statistic for me today was the one put forward by my right hon. Friend the Member for
Putney (Justine Greening) who, with all her considerable experience in the Cabinet, has done so much to further the cause of equality, not least as the preceding Minister for Women and Equalities. The fact is that, if we were to encourage gender equality and achieve it across the world, it would add £28 trillion to our global GDP, which is a startling fact.

We, the United Kingdom, are doing our bit, because we have the highest rate of employment of women ever, and we are working hard to support women in work so that they can fulfil their potential and achieve their ambition. We are taking strong action in this area. I hope that 4 April is ingrained in every chief executive’s mind, because that is the deadline when every large employer will have to tell us their gender pay gap. Contrary to the suggestions that may have been made, we are doing that not just because we like collecting figures, but because we want to establish where there are pay gaps and then work towards closing them down.

We have also heard about flexible working, and we are very much working towards normalising that practice. Indeed, 97% of UK workplaces now offer flexible working, but of course there is more to do. We know that there are schemes for shared parental leave and for encouraging people who have taken time out for caring to return to work. In fact, we are investing a great deal of money to increase opportunities and support for those who are returning to work, but we cannot do this alone. We need employers to take bold action to ensure that women are just as able as men to fulfil their potential and use their talents and skills. This country cannot succeed fully if one half of its population is held back.

Flowing from work is, of course, education. Several colleagues have emphasised the importance that education plays in setting up girls to flourish in the workplace and to having equal access with their male counterparts to more productive and higher paying sectors. We have invested in programmes to encourage take-up in STEM-related subjects and courses, including maths and computer science. We are also raising awareness of the range of careers that STEM qualifications offer, through initiatives such as STEM ambassadors, and we continue to deliver high-quality apprenticeships, which provide choice for young women and men as they consider their future careers. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) about Ada Lovelace, which was absolutely fascinating. We even heard about the scientist behind Mr Whippy ice cream—a certain Margaret Thatcher. I have to say that I have learned something new today.

We must of course reflect on the fact that this is not national women’s day, but International Women’s Day. Several Members spoke about that, mentioning the Rohingya and Bangladesh in particular. It is not only at home where this Government have made real progress to improve the lives of women and girls. We are respected globally for our world-leading legislation and policy, and we continue to play a key role on the international stage to press for change. We are committed to ensuring that all women have the same opportunities and choices, no matter where they live.

UK aid has a huge impact on the lives of millions. It has supported more than 6,000 communities across 16 countries and made public commitments to end female genital mutilation. That represents 18 million people—more than twice the population of London—and it has enabled 8.5 million women to access modern methods of family planning over five years, empowering women to make choices about their own bodies.

We want to build on those achievements. As we have heard, the Secretary of State for International Development launched her strategic vision for gender equality yesterday. This recognises that gender equality cannot be treated as an isolated issue, but must be embedded in everything that we do. It sets out how we plan to continue our global leadership role. I am proud of this Government’s ambition to improve the rights of women and girls globally; we need to be ambitious if we are to continue making progress in areas such as education, economic empowerment and violence, and if we are to create a world in which all women and girls can have equal rights, opportunities and freedoms, as described by the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire).

In conclusion, today’s debate has highlighted what we all already knew: that we have achieved some things, but there is still a way to go. There is much more to be done before we achieve gender equality in the UK and around the world. I want to end the debate on a positive note, because this is the one day of the year on which we get to celebrate women. I want to highlight brilliant women and the social, economic, political and cultural contributions that they make.

We have heard from the Home Secretary that the United Kingdom has its second female Prime Minister—that is particularly apt given that we are celebrating the centenary of suffrage—and that we sit in the most diverse Parliament that we have ever had. In the past year, we have seen women breaking barriers in public life and industry. Last year, Cressida Dick became the first ever female Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, and Dany Cotton became the first ever female commissioner of the London fire brigade. Already this year, Sarah Clarke has made history as the first female Black Rod, and the Royal Mint has appointed Anne Jessop, who is its first female chief executive in its more than 1,000 years of existence. I have no doubt that the first female President of the Supreme Court, Baroness Hale, will be doing all she can to improve equality in the judiciary.

We must not forget that three of the four medals that team GB took home from the winter Olympics were won by women. Lizzy Yarnold became Britain’s most decorated winter Olympian, taking a second gold in the women’s skeleton. Anyone who hurtles down ice chutes at 80 miles an hour on what I can only describe as a tea tray deserves all our respect.

We want the celebration to continue beyond International Women’s Day. This year, we are celebrating our history, but I hope that we also see this year as the start of the century of women. I urge every Member of this House to take part in any way they can, whether it is by supporting women’s organisations, speaking at events, going into schools to speak, or asking women whether they will stand. We will have a whole package of celebrations during the year, and they will be revealed as the year goes on. One example of how we are going to celebrate is with the holding of EqualiTeas in June and July across the country, to share, debate and celebrate our right to vote over a cup of tea and a slice of cake. They
are often the answer to many problems in life, and I am delighted that we are celebrating our suffrage in that way.

When my grandmother was born, no woman had the right to vote. Fast forward two generations, and I am here at the Dispatch Box and a female Prime Minister is leading the celebrations. I leave the House with this question: what more can we achieve in another two generations? That is our challenge.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Vote 100 and International Women’s Day.

**Business without Debate**

*BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE*

Ordered,

That at the sitting on Tuesday 13 March, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents) and Standing Order No. 17 (Delegated legislation (negative procedure)), debate on the Motions in the name of Jeremy Corbyn relating to Universal Credit (S.I., 2018, No. 65), Children and Young Persons (S.I., 2018, No. 148), Children and Young Persons (S.I., 2018, No. 146) and Social Security (S.I., 2018, No. 120), may continue for three hours, after which the Speaker shall put forthwith the Questions necessary to dispose of each such Motion; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(Andrew Stephenson.)

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**Rivers Authorities**

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Andrew Stephenson.)*

4.23 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): We have very long memories in the west country, so I want to take Members back in time. It was said that some 400 years ago, in 1607, “huge and mighty hills of water” poured across the county, moving at a speed “faster than a greyhound can run”.

Water covered the Somerset levels and moors, and it devastated the land—but not, I am afraid, for the last time. Members will remember that the winter of 2013-14 was the wettest in Somerset for 250 years, and 150 sq km of land was completely submerged for weeks. The Environment Agency said that 100 million cubic metres of water covered Somerset’s fertile soil. By my reckoning, that means that we were up to our necks in 40,000 Olympic swimming pools-worth of water. One hundred and sixty-five homes were flooded, 7,000 businesses were affected, and 81 roads were closed. I will never forget making visits to the village of Muchelney not by road, but by boat. I stood in people’s homes that were not only destroyed by waist-deep water but had been flooded only 12 months before. Livelihoods were driven to the brink, and people were understandably driven to despair. The cost to Somerset was estimated at £147 million.

As those waters receded, more than just the bare earth revealed itself. We saw also that perhaps one or two things had been neglected. Local people rightly argued, fairly strongly, that not enough contingency planning had taken place. “By definition”, they cried, “we’ve been living with insufficient flood management schemes, catchment planning and so on.” We felt like Deucalion, the son of Prometheus, who, as we all know, saw after the great mythical Greek flood the extent of the destruction and felt grief so great that tears kept pouring from his eyes. His wish was to create a new form of humanity. Our wish was to create the Somerset Rivers Authority.

The people of Somerset are no strangers to local action, so local people tipped out their wellies, gathered themselves up and summoned various flood risk authorities: Somerset County Council, our five noble district councils, the Environment Agency, Natural England, the Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee, and our inland drainage boards. Then, with £1.9 million stumped up by the Government, they coagulated all these into a new body—the Somerset Rivers Authority. This body sprang from the 20-year flood action plan that had been put together following the floods at the very sensible request of my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), who was then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I well remember wading through water to meet him to discuss the need to keep a lid on the severity, duration, frequency and impact of flooding. I have also talked to him about that more recently.

I must point out that the SRA was not, and is not, a usurper. It does not diminish the roles of the other flood management partners or, indeed, of landowners; it acts to improve the joint working of all those bodies.
In essence, it gives us an extra level of flood protection and resilience. It raises extra money, does extra work, and provides extra information and co-ordination. Without wanting to go into the minutiae of its daily grind, it oversees the flood action plan across five areas: dredging, river management, land management, infrastructure, and building local resilience.

The SRA has overseen some 90 projects, with 22 more planned for 2018-19. Some of them have dozens of different elements, so hundreds of areas have benefited. This year the SRA is maintenance dredging 4 km of the River Parrett; it is monitoring silt in the Parrett and Tone rivers for a future dredging programme; it is designing and implementing a variety of flood management capital works to hold water in the upper catchment and reduce peak flows; it is rolling up its sleeves and undertaking pumping station repairs and improvements; and it is carrying out a highway flood risk reduction scheme, with desilting of structures and gully jetting.

Fiendishly clever schemes have been developed, such as injection drilling, which is now used on the Parrett and Tone rivers and can achieve in one week what used to take four months, and at a small fraction of the cost. Such things are qualitatively better for farmers, residents and our splendid Somerset environment. I could go on all day about soil management, cropping techniques, channel clearances, housing planning analysis, drain enhancements, the tidal barrier—that is a big one—and the endless flood management schemes, but I am sure that people get the picture. For the SRA, its cup runneth over, essentially so that our cup does not run over. Such river authorities are obviously essential to the continued enjoyment of life in low-lying areas, but they face a problem. As is so often the case, it comes down to money, although this time it is more of a structural issue.

The SRA has ploughed on, silently and deftly managing our waterways to keep our feet dry. So far, we have paid for that by coughing up a small shadow precept on our council tax bills, plus a bit of money from drainage boards and spot of growth deal funding. I should explain that the term “shadow precept” refers to the extra flexibility that was granted to Somerset councils in 2016 as part of the local government finance settlement. Many in Somerset, myself included, would like to see the shadow precept put on a permanent statutory footing. Understandably, the SRA itself has also been calling for legislation to put its finances on the same stable long-term footing as a precepting body.

At the moment, because the SRA receives annual funding on a voluntary basis from local authorities, it has a hand-to-mouth existence. It is unable to coherently plan ahead, which means it is not in a position to enter into longer-term contracts or undertake longer-term financial planning. A stable funding arrangement, in the form of a local precept, would allow such river authorities to plan more effectively and efficiently, locking in improved protection for the good people of Somerset in the future.

The original 20-year flood action plan included the aspiration to allow Somerset’s rivers authority to become a statutory body, but we always knew that that would involve legislation. We knew that we would need to create a power for the Secretary of State to create statutory rivers authorities and to add them to the precepting authorities listed in the Local Government Finance Act 1992.

I hope we can achieve that, but before I come on to that, I must talk briefly about internal drainage boards. That may not be a phrase you want to hear every day, Mr Deputy Speaker, but internal drainage boards are a vital part of the landscape of flood risk management. In Somerset, our three IDBs beaver away for us, almost literally, maintaining the watercourses, draining the land and reducing flood risk. I am very much aware that one or two areas of England are not fortunate enough to be in Somerset. Many of those less favoured parts of the country do not have the benefit of an IDB, and technical problems with the legislation on these bodies prevent them from being established. In essence, that is down to an anomaly in the valuation of land under legislation that is getting a bit long in the tooth.

That is very much the case in Cumbria, for example, where the local flood action plan drawn up by the community after the 2015 floods calls for the establishment of a new IDB, but they are stuck and cannot do it. We in this place should address that as soon as possible, so that all parts of England and Wales that desire an IDB can have one. Who would not want to reap the benefits that my constituency enjoys? Quite frankly, who would not want to be in my constituency?

It would be remiss of me at this point not to commend the Government for the action they continue to take to reduce flood risk and the significant new investment that has been provided. In fact, between 2016 and 2021, the Government are putting £2.6 billion into flood defences and building 1,500 new flood schemes that will better protect almost a third of a million homes. Those kinds of initiatives continue to improve the protection of people right across the country. There is also a need for local action to reduce flood risk. As I have set out, in Somerset we have the rivers authority and three internal drainage boards, but we need to understand their future.

In January 2017, the Government’s response to the report by the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on future flood prevention made clear the intention to introduce precepting legislation as soon as parliamentary time became available. I would like to draw the House’s attention to the Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage Bill, which I introduced this week and which would enable the Government to deliver on that commitment. I am delighted to say that the Government are fully supporting the Bill, as are many Members of the House, including the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish).

I very much look forward to the thoughts and remarks of my hon. Friend the Minister. As she is aware, not only would my Bill allow the Secretary of State to establish the Somerset Rivers Authority as a statutory and precepting body, thus placing its feet—and ours—on safe, dry land, but it would remove the hurdle faced by other parts of the country in setting up or expanding inland drainage boards. Lastly, I put on the record my sincere thanks to my hon. Friend for her and the Government’s support in this process. I think I speak for much of Somerset when I say that we all hope this will soon mean that nothing can leak over the tops of our wellies for some years to come.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) on securing it. He spoke powerfully about, and eloquently described, the devastation caused by flooding.

As all hon. Members are aware, flooding can have a devastating effect on people’s lives, not only due to the immediate pressures they face at the time, but because of some of the mental health problems caused, particularly when heavy rain pours down again and they worry about possible future flooding. Indeed, I have supported my own constituents in Suffolk Coastal following flooding in recent years, so I have experienced this at first hand. The Government continue to invest in better protecting communities from flooding, and I know that you are very keen for us to invest in Lancashire, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is also important, however, that we empower those communities to take further action. I am very pleased to say that my hon. Friend is correct that the Government support his private Member’s Bill on rivers authorities and land drainage. That modest Bill could, if successful, deliver real change.

As my hon. Friend said, following those floods, there was a strong political desire for co-ordination across the county to devise a bespoke new initiative. That was why, in January 2014, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), the then Secretary of State, asked Somerset County Council to establish a partnership between 11 of Somerset’s existing flood risk management authorities: Somerset County Council, the five district councils, the Axe Brue and Parrett Internal Drainage Boards, the Environment Agency, Natural England, and the Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee.

That flood action plan led to the concept of a new body—a rivers authority—and recommended the creation of such a body in Somerset. This was done with the aim of creating a way for the different bodies that have a responsibility or interest in flood risk management to work together better. The Somerset Rivers Authority was formally established in January 2015. It is a partnership between 11 of Somerset’s existing flood risk management authorities: Somerset County Council, the five district councils, the Axe Brue and Parrett Internal Drainage Boards, the Environment Agency, Natural England, and the Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee.

I understand how important this issue is to the people of Somerset. Like my hon. Friend, I support the work of the Somerset Rivers Authority, which I had the opportunity to see for myself when I visited Somerset last year. The SRAs role is to co-ordinate the local flood risk management authorities, utilising the expertise of individual partners. It also supports additional flood risk management works that may not otherwise have been possible, such as enhanced river maintenance, including on ordinary watercourses. It does not seek to replace existing flood risk management authorities or their funding mechanisms.

As my hon. Friend said, the Government supported the Somerset Rivers Authority in the beginning with £1.9 million of start-up funding, and a review into the long-term funding options was commissioned. The review recommended giving the Somerset Rivers Authority precepting powers to raise funds for additional flood risk management. To secure the SRAs future, we would need new legislation to give the Secretary of State power to create rivers authorities and add them to the category of major precepting authorities under the Local Government Finance Act 1992. I am pleased that that is provided for in clause 1 of the Bill.

Not only do the Government want to bring forward these measures, but they are what the local community in Somerset has been calling for. I therefore hope that the Bill will make progress through Parliament. However, such a decision is not made lightly. The Government recognise that any precept will be funded by taxpayers, but that is already the case under the interim arrangements. The existing funding arrangements for the SRA are far from ideal and a permanent solution is required. Making the SRA an autonomous precepting authority would make it more transparent and ensure that money is ring-fenced solely for its important work. Adding the SRA to the category of major precepting authorities will also mean it is covered by the safeguards set out in the 1992 Act, including the requirement for a referendum if the precept exceeds a set amount.

The Bill also sets out how, through regulations that Parliament will have the opportunity to scrutinise further, the governance of a rivers authority should be established. Although my hon. Friend is right to say that a new category of major precepting authorities will be created, the situation in Somerset is unique, because the complex interplay of water means that such matters are self-contained within the county. Were the Bill to be enacted, the Government would implement the necessary regulations promptly.

My hon. Friend mentioned internal drainage boards. As he pointed out, three of those are included in the Somerset Rivers Authority: Axe Brue, North Somerset Levels, and Parrett. He will recognise how effective they have been in their ongoing work with the authority. IDBs are among the oldest forms of democratic decision-making structures in the UK, with their history going back to the 13th century. Their main focus then was the drainage of agricultural land in low lying areas, but they have since evolved to play a much wider role, and they remain to this day a key partner in local flood risk management. That includes playing a major role in the identification and delivery of capital projects in local communities.

That model has worked well around the country, including in Suffolk Coastal with the East Suffolk IDB. However, as my hon. Friend said, not everywhere has
such a body, and many of those that already exist would like to expand their boundaries. One place without an IDB that has suffered devastating flooding in recent years is Cumbria. It has requested new IDBs, in particular for Lyth Valley and Waver Wampool. As with the SRA, those requests have arisen from a flood action plan that was devised after significant flooding. However, a combination of issues is stopping the creation of those bodies. There are missing or incomplete valuation lists from 1990, and existing legislation does not allow for any other valuation lists to be used. That prevents IDBs from being able to value the land and determine the special levy they charge. That applies to the creation of new IDBs and the expansion of existing ones, so a change in legislation is required.

My hon. Friend has been generous in the Bill that he presented to the House for First Reading on Monday. He has ensured that such a change will be achievable through three additional clauses that will help to create new internal drainage boards where there is local consensus. The measures will also enable existing boards to expand, again where there is local consensus. In short, the Bill will enable the Secretary of State to establish an alternative methodology for calculating the value of other land in an IDB, and it will enable the Valuation Office Agency to share the most up-to-date information. Finally, it will enable the Secretary of State to establish an alternative methodology for the calculation of the value of chargeable property, agricultural land and buildings in an internal drainage district. All three clauses include regulation-making powers that will be subject to the affirmative procedure, thus providing Parliament with the opportunity to scrutinise them further. I restate that such changes will go ahead only if local communities want them.

The Government support my hon. Friend’s Bill and what it is trying to achieve, and I am aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, that there is appetite for the creation of an internal drainage board in Lancashire. The SRA and IDBs play an important role across the country, and in particular they play a crucial role in local flood risk management. I hope that the debate has demonstrated that to the House.

The unique challenges of the Somerset levels and moors make it necessary and appropriate to create the Somerset Rivers Authority, and to put it on a secure footing to allow it to co-ordinate and manage flood risk into the future. This important body could do even more with secure funding each year. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for using this debate as a way to discuss his Bill. I am confident that this good debate will continue and that hon. Members will want to debate the Bill further in Committee once it receives, as we hope, its Second Reading a week on Friday.

On International Women’s Day, I want to place on record my thanks to the permanent secretary in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Clare Moriarty. She still in a minority across the civil service as a permanent secretary, but she shows great leadership in our Department. I also want to point out not that I have not found time to buy a card for Mother’s day, but that for many people in this House, their woman of the year will always be their mum. I want to wish my mother the best for this Sunday. I promise, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I shall go out and buy a card straight away after this important debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Make sure you do.

Question put and agreed to.

4.45 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Homelessness

2. Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce homelessness. [904290]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Tackling homelessness and rough sleeping is a key priority for me and my Ministry. That is why we are spending more than £1 billion through to 2020. We are implementing the most ambitious legislative reform in decades—the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—and we have established the rough sleeping and homelessness reduction taskforce.

Will Quince: The all-party group on ending homelessness recently took evidence on the success of rapid rehousing models in Denmark. What consideration has my right hon. Friend given to the merits of rolling out such programmes alongside the faster and wider roll-out of Housing First in England?

Sajid Javid: May I first pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the important role that he has played as the co-chair of the all-party group on ending homelessness? He is absolutely right to point to international experience when looking at the huge challenge that this country faces. As he knows, Housing First has come from the experience of others, particularly Finland. I thank him for his support.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The rising level of homelessness in Manchester is the biggest issue that people raise with me on the doorstep and elsewhere. All the good work that we are doing to rehouse people does not matter when there are too many people coming through the system at the other end. What conversations is the Secretary of State having with other Departments, especially the Department for Work and Pensions, about stopping people becoming homeless in the first place? The situation is getting completely out of control.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this issue, which comes up in Manchester and many other parts of the country. She is right to point to the cross-departmental work that is required, including with the Department for Work and Pensions and others, such as the Ministry of Justice, given the number of offenders who sometimes end up on the streets. The work is being co-ordinated, and the taskforce that the Prime Minister has created is helping to achieve just that.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with Catherine Street of the Memorial University of Newfoundland that the causes of homelessness and sleeping on the streets are very many and complex, and that this is not just down to a lack of housing? Will my right hon. Friend take the opportunity to go to the west midlands to visit Mayor Andy Street to see the work and initiatives that he is undertaking to prevent the problem?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend mentions two Streets; I agree with him on both. Catherine Street is absolutely right about the complex causes of homelessness, particularly rough sleeping. Andy Street, the Mayor of the west midlands, has really led the way on this, including with the Housing First project.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Exeter has suffered a terrible increase in homelessness and rough sleeping since 2010, although strenuous efforts by its Labour council have led to a reduction in rough sleeping over the past two years. Will the Secretary of State and Government colleagues revisit the decisions to cut supported living and public health grants to local authorities, which fund alcohol and drug treatment programmes, because that is hampering local authorities’ attempts to tackle this problem?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to join the right hon. Gentleman in commending the work done in Exeter. We should all try to learn from one another, and councils can learn from each other. It is important that we keep up funding wherever it is necessary to address the causes of addiction, whether that is drug or alcohol addiction. That is why we are providing a total of £1 billion in funding up to 2020, including for a number of projects that are specifically designed to help with addiction problems.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Some 61% of rough sleepers in London are non-UK citizens. What can we do about the importation of homelessness?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to point to the causes of homelessness. Of course, a number of people who sleep on our streets are not from the UK. Everyone deserves help, but we must look carefully at the causes of homelessness. My Department is working carefully and closely with the Home Office to see what more we can do.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): LGBT young people are much more likely than others to become homeless. According to the Albert Kennedy Trust, they account for up to 24% of the young jobless population. What is the Secretary of State doing to address this particular problem?

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Lady. Lady that anyone who is homeless, particularly anyone who is sleeping rough, deserves the help of central and local government. We have more than 48 different types of projects in place—many of them are community-led and many are funded directly by the Government—that are designed to reduce the number of people on our streets and those suffering from homelessness.
Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The last official survey in Cheltenham found nine homeless people, each of whom is a living rebuke to us to do more. Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking all the staff at the P3 charity who are ensuring that the £1 million social impact bond provided by central Government is being used to provide one-to-one support?

Sajid Javid: Yes. I commend the P3 charity for its work. I know that my hon. Friend has taken a lot of interest in this. The Government have helped to fund some eight social impact bonds to help with rough sleeping, including the one in Cheltenham, and they are making a huge difference.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): In Scotland we have some of the strongest rights for homeless people in the world. The Scottish Government’s homelessness and rough sleeping action group recently reported, and it has been praised by charities for taking steps in the right direction, including with a £50 million fund to eradicate homelessness. What cognisance are Ministers here taking of the work that is going on in Scotland? Will the Secretary of State look at the group’s recommendations?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady rightly emphasises the point about learning from each other. Where Scotland has had success on homelessness and rough sleeping, we shall certainly look into that, and we will seek other examples in the UK. My hon. Friend the Housing Minister is visiting Scotland later this week and will be looking at that particular issue.

Homeowners: Mortgage Costs

3. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for homeowners in meeting mortgage costs. [904291]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): One of the best ways in which the Government can support homeowners with their mortgage costs is by ensuring that the economy remains strong and competitive so that employment is high and interest rates are as low as possible.

David Hanson: At the end of this month, the Government are taking away mortgage support from 110,000 people, and only 7,000 so far have applied for the loan that replaces that scheme. What do the Government think that the other 103,000 people are going to do on 2 April?

Sajid Javid: I think that the right hon. Gentleman is referring to the support for mortgage interest policy, on which the DWP leads. The Government are right to strike the right balance between the needs of hard-pressed homeowners and the taxpayer. If he is really interested in helping homeowners, perhaps he can explain to his constituents why he voted against the stamp duty cut the light of the Secretary of State’s earlier comments about responsibility to the taxpayer, will he contrast the poorest homeowners who will lose help with mortgage interest with these heavily subsidised, well-off people up and down the country?

Dominic Raab: I think that some factual clarification would help the hon. Gentleman. Because four out of five of those benefiting from Help to Buy have been first-time buyers, and three out of five households benefiting from Help to Buy had combined incomes of £50,000 or less. We are on their side; it is a shame that Labour is not.

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Adult Social Care Funding

5. Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of projected funding for adult social care until 2020. [904291]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): In addition to the spending review package, the Government provided a further £2 billion for adult social care at last year’s Budget and an additional £150 million in the most recent local government finance settlement. As a result, councils will be able to increase spending on adult social care in real terms each year until 2020.

Tracy Brabin: Kirklees Council spends 35% of its budget on adult social care. It has just raised its council tax by 6%, and half of that is ring-fenced to fund social care, but the council will still have to cut tens of millions in the years ahead. So, ahead of tomorrow’s spending statement, will the Minister tell us what he has done to secure more funding from the Treasury for social care to alleviate the pressure on councils such as Kirklees?

Rishi Sunak: In the most recent local government finance settlement, the Secretary of State listened to councils’ concerns and increased funding for adult social care by £150 million, with £26 million for Kirklees Council in particular. I recently met the Key Cities group, of which Kirklees is a member, to discuss its ideas for reforming the funding formula so as to adequately reflect the pressures faced by councils such as Kirklees.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): When the then Communities and Local Government Committee adopted the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) that became the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, Ministers, to their credit, engaged really positively to make that Bill work. May I urge the Minister to be just as positive about the planned joint Committee inquiry into the funding of adult care? Indeed, Front Benchers on both sides of the House will need to engage with that process if we are to have a long-term answer.

Rishi Sunak: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. As he knows, the Government are committed to publishing a Green Paper on adult social care this summer. Alongside that, there is a workstream on working-age adult social care to which I am sure that he will be keen to contribute.

Rishi Sunak: I agree with the hon. Lady. That this is a challenge facing our country, and it is important that we get this right and put social care on a sustainable footing, not just for this year but for the years to come. That is exactly why the Government are committed to the Green Paper and to tackling this problem, and she should look forward to seeing the Green Paper’s contents this summer.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): The Minister referred to the local government finance settlement, but this year’s settlement still means a cut of £177 million for adult social care compared with last year. Given that the National Audit Office’s report states that more and more councils are only just managing to balance their books by using their reserves to cover overspends on social care services, how does the Minister suggest that councils can avoid declaring themselves effectively bankrupt, as Northamptonshire County Council did last month, as in many cases their reserves will be gone by 2020?

Rishi Sunak: I simply do not recognise those figures. The Government have increased funding for adult social care. Over these three years, £9.4 billion has been allocated for adult social care funding, with £150 million more at the last local government finance settlement. This Government are listening to councils and delivering extra resources to help them.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): The Local Government Finance Act 2012 divorced local government funding from any assessment of need. The Government’s insistence that the problem can be solved by councils raising precepts is simply wrong, because councils in wealthier areas, which have more properties in the higher bands, can raise more money than those with more properties in the lower bands, which usually have the greatest needs, the greatest levels of long-term disease and so on. When will the Minister understand this and actually start to allocate social services funding on the basis of need?

Rishi Sunak: I can reassure the hon. Lady that the allocation for social care funding does take into account the relative council tax bases of local authorities across the country. That said, I appreciate that the funding formula is out of date and in need of review, which is why we have launched a consultation on reforming it. That consultation closes today, but I would welcome her comments and input into it. We will reform the formula so that it can adequately take account of need, as she suggests.

Help To Buy Scheme

6. David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of the Help to Buy scheme and the reduction in stamp duty on first-time buyers. [904294]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The number of first-time buyers was at an 11-year high in 2017, at 365,000 across the UK. That shows that our concerted action to get more people into home ownership through initiatives such as Help to Buy and the new stamp duty exemption for first-time buyers is working.

David Warburton: It sounds like my right hon. Friend agrees with me that home ownership is a fundamentally good thing. Some 86% of our fellow citizens aspire to it, and there is nothing like spreading the economic benefits
of ownership more widely in society. Does he further agree that we should use every policy lever at our disposal to encourage home ownership and to give those all-important first-time buyers a leg up on the ladder?

Sajid Javid: I could not agree more. The overwhelming majority of people want to own their own home, and we need to do more to help them to do just that. The plan that we have set out, including last week, to build 300,000 homes a year will help more and more people to realise that dream.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Why does the Secretary of State not wake up? So many people in my constituency and throughout the country know that this Government have failed to deliver enough houses to buy and enough to rent. The fact is that there are so many nimbys sitting on the Government Benches—he is speaking to one of them—that Ministers do not have the courage to do anything about it.

Sajid Javid: It is the Conservatives who are responsible for house building last year reaching its highest level in all but one of the past 30 years, and it was under a previous Labour Government that we had the lowest level of house building that this country had seen since the 1920s.

New Homes

7. David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the delivery of new homes. [904295]

16. Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the delivery of new homes. [904304]

Sajid Javid: The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Last year, some 217,000 homes were added to our housing stock in England. We have set out bold and comprehensive reforms to deliver on average 300,000 homes a year by the middle of the 2020s in England, including in last week’s publication of the draft revised national planning policy framework.

David T. C. Davies: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the enormous progress that he is making. Does he agree, however, that it will not be possible to get the housing shortage completely under control until we have brought migration levels down from the completely unsustainable heights that were created by Labour?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that we are committed to both reducing net migration to sustainable levels and building the homes that this country needs.

Lucy Allan: Telford is a rapidly growing new town in which thousands of new homes are built every year, but for too many new-build homeowners, the reality is unfinished communal areas, unadopted roads, failure to comply with section 106, developers failing to take responsibility and the local council passing the buck. What will the Secretary of State do to strengthen the rights of new-build homeowners?

Sajid Javid: First, let me commend my hon. Friend for the work that she does through the all-party group on new towns. She is absolutely right to raise that issue and to emphasise the need for infrastructure alongside new housing. I know that she welcomes the housing infrastructure fund. In terms of holding developers to their commitments, I hope that she will contribute to our consultation on that topic, which was launched just this week.

20. [904308] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Figures for York show that no new social housing has been commissioned under the current council for the last three years, except for older people’s accommodation, where there has been a net loss. The right to buy has made things worse. When, under the Government’s new planning framework, will the council be forced to build social housing in York?

Sajid Javid: We are working with councils throughout the country to help them to meet their housing needs, including through more social housing where that is required. The proof of that was in the last Budget, in which we increased the housing revenue account—the amount that councils can borrow from the Treasury to build more council homes and other types of social housing. If York wants to take advantage of that, it can.

23. [904311] Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Bristol has the highest rate of office-to-residential accommodation conversions outside London, and the permitted development rights scheme means that that does not have to involve any affordable housing element. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that councils such as Bristol can insist that affordable housing is built in our city centre?

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Green-belt protections around Bristol and Bath are displacing housing targets beyond the green belt into Somerset. Should the councils unable to build enough houses be required to deliver transport and infrastructure plans that will service the commuting needs of new Somerset residents needing to travel through the protected green belt on their way to work?

Sajid Javid: We want to help all councils meet their local housing need, and that includes helping with their plans as they develop them, but also giving them more options other than looking at the green belt, as we did in the recent draft plan that was published earlier this month, and helping with infrastructure, which means the £5 billion housing infrastructure fund.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The previous Conservative Mayor of London set up the London housing bank, a loan scheme so restrictive that housing providers could not borrow from it. Will the
Secretary of State explain why, instead of responding to requests from the current Mayor of London over the past 18 months to remove some of the restrictions on this scheme to enable much-needed affordable homes to be built, he has decided to withdraw the funding for affordable homes altogether? Will he also explain how it is that the first the Mayor’s office heard of this was via an article in The Huffington Post?

Sajid Javid: We all want more affordable homes, including of course in our capital city, and that is why over £3 billion was given to London for affordable housing in the spring Budget. It was the biggest ever settlement, and it was welcomed by the Mayor. Yet despite that, we have seen a fall in affordable housing delivery under Sadiq Khan. That is not acceptable: he needs to do much better.

8. Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the time taken to build new homes. [904296]

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): Last week, the Government published the national planning policy framework for consultation, which, with clearer guidance to councils and developers, will help to deliver more homes and do so more quickly.

Nicky Morgan: I thank the Minister for that answer. Charnwood Borough Council—for the sake for disclosure, I should say that my husband is the leader, although I refuse to call him that—has planning permissions for refuse to call him that—has planning permissions for 160,000 new homes registered to be built, which is the highest number since the financial crash. My right hon. Friend for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) is reviewing build-out rates.

Dominic Raab: The good news is that, in 2017, we saw 160,000 new homes registered to be built, which is the highest number since the financial crash. My right hon. Friend is right about speed. The NPPF will help to deliver that through the housing delivery test, and my right hon. Friend for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) is reviewing build-out rates.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) rose—

Mr Speaker: I have no wish to be unkind to the hon. Lady, but let me put it this way: we have had a dose from Bath, and by long-standing convention, a Member is not called twice on substantive questions. If the hon. Lady seeks to catch my eye during topical questions, she may be successful. I admire her persistence, but I hope she will understand that that is the way we operate.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): She is greedy.

Mr Speaker: No, no. The hon. Lady is not greedy; she is just keen.

Local Authority Plans

9. John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): How many local authorities have had their local plans signed off by his Department in the last two years. [904297]

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): In nearly all cases, it is for local authorities to take the final decision on a local plan. In the past two years, 50 local plans were deemed sound by planning inspectors, and one by the Ministry itself.

John Mann: Yes, but let us look at this consultation from last week. According to the Government, neighbourhood plans can be overturned by local councils above them, and—above them—local council plans can be overturned by the Secretary of State and his faceless bureaucrats. What is wrong in this country with freedom and democracy, with local people making the decisions effectively, fairly and democratically? Is this Joe Stalin or English democracy that this Government are forcing upon us?

Dominic Raab: For all that thunder and lightning, we are investing £23 million to support neighbourhood planning groups. I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that 94% of councils have published local plans, compared with 32% when Labour left office. The previous Labour Government wantonly failed to deliver on encouraging the take-up of local plans, where this Government have succeeded.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Talking of planning ahead, two councils in Somerset—Taunton Deane Borough Council and West Somerset Council—are waiting to form a single council. They have already had major savings by sharing services jointly, but they now really need to know if they can form one authority. Will my hon. Friend update me on the progress of this process?

Dominic Raab: The issue is under imminent review. The Secretary of State is giving it his personal attention and a decision will be taken shortly.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Talking of planning ahead, two councils in Somerset—Taunton Deane Borough Council and West Somerset Council—are awaiting to form a single council. They have already had major savings by sharing services jointly, but they now really need to know if they can form one authority. Will my hon. Friend update me on the progress of this process?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We have reinforced the focus on brownfield first, plus things like looking for extra density where it can be provided, through the national planning policy framework. I look forward to his supportive comments during the consultation.

New Homes for Social Rent

10. Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of new homes for social rent since 2010. [904298]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Since 2010 we have delivered 357,000 affordable homes, including about 128,000 homes for social rent.
The Government are providing £9 billion for affordable housing, a £1 billion housing revenue account borrowing freedom, and rent certainty for social landlords. Those measures will support social landlords to build more affordable homes where the need is greatest.

**Stephen Timms**: The number of Government-funded homes built for social rent fell to 199 in the past six months—the lowest number since records have been kept. Is it not now clear that there is an urgent need for a major Government-funded programme of social housing?

**Mrs Wheeler**: I know that this is an issue that the right hon. Gentleman has championed, and it is a pleasure to do business with him. We absolutely recognise the critical role that supported accommodation can play in helping vulnerable people to live independently. In fact, we have delivered almost 30,000 new units and we have plans to increase the number in those areas that need it most.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her answers. Will she explain why the Department is returning to the Treasury money that could be used to build desperately needed affordable new homes?

**Mrs Wheeler**: I am delighted that my hon. Friend has asked that question, because some people seem to be causing mischief. This is less than 3% of the total budget. The money has been re-profiled, to come back in in future years. When councils, local authorities and housing associations can bid in, the money is there to be spent. We want it to be spent.

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Building council houses is a very effective and financially prudent way to provide houses for social rent, but it is being choked off by the Government persisting with only inching the cap up, when they could remove it completely. When will they remove the cap and let our councils get building?

**Mrs Wheeler**: I do not understand why people misunderstand what is going on in local government finance. For those areas with the most serious shortages of affordable housing, the cap has been lifted to £1 billion of borrowing. We need local authorities to step up. If the hon. Gentleman’s local council has projects, like mine does, they will be looked on favourably. Please ask local councils to step up.

**Rough Sleeping: West Midlands**

11. **Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the number of people sleeping rough in the west midlands.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government** (Mrs Heather Wheeler): The number of evening rough sleepers in the west midlands has increased by eight people over the year from 2016 to 2017.

**Ian Austin** indicated dissent.

**Mrs Wheeler**: I have the figures, sir; please do not disagree with me. We have committed to providing £28 million of funding to pilot a Housing First approach in three major regions, including that of the West Midlands combined authority. I look forward very much to working with Mayor Street.

**Ian Austin**: Anybody in the west midlands who hears the Minister say that the number of rough sleepers has increased by only eight will be absolutely staggered at this Government’s complacency. The fact is that rough sleeping has soared, not just in Birmingham but even in towns such as Dudley, where, tragically, a homeless man died in a tent in the past few weeks. The Mayor’s policy will not result in rough sleeping being abolished until 2027. We need a much more urgent approach. Are Ministers prepared to fund an expansion of Birmingham City Council and the Labour police and crime commissioner’s street intervention teams, which have helped hundreds of people over the past few months?

**Mrs Wheeler**: That was a really good question. Intelligent questions in this Chamber are helpful, because they mean we can give intelligent answers. The intelligent answer is that the Housing First project is about wraparound care, with £28 million of public money going to help to solve this desperate problem. The advisory panel is meeting for the third time in two weeks’ time and the taskforce has already met. This is an urgent matter for the Government and it will be solved.

**Local Government Finance Settlement 2018-19**

12. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the local government finance settlement 2018-19 on the financial sustainability of local authorities.

19. **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the local government finance settlement 2018-19 on the ability of local authorities to meet their statutory responsibilities.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government** (Rishi Sunak): The 2018-19 settlement is the third year of a four-year deal providing funding certainty and is accepted by 97% of councils. The settlement sees a real-terms increase in resources to local government over the next two years, totalling £45.1 billion in the forthcoming financial year.

**Diana Johnson**: Hull is the third most deprived local authority in the country. Two thirds more Hull residents require social care compared with the national average. We have lost half our Government funding since 2010 and we will be getting the lowest amount per head from the social care precept of any Yorkshire and Humber council. With the Government having got it so wrong so far, will the Minister guarantee that Hull will now get a fair funding settlement?

**Rishi Sunak**: The hon. Lady makes some comments about funding for deprived areas. She will be pleased to know that funding per household in her particular area is higher than the average for unitary authorities across the country and that in general the most deprived local authorities have funding per household that is 23% higher than the most well-off. On her point, I can reassure her that we are committed to introducing a new fair funding formula and I look forward to hearing the responses from her council as we develop it.
Matt Western: In a letter to the Secretary of State last month, the Conservative leader of Warwicke County Council stated that in the council’s view the current funding model for local government is unsustainable. Is she correct?

Rishi Sunak: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman makes a point about the funding settlement and the formula. He will know from his membership of the Select Committee, which I have just had the pleasure to appear before, that we are looking very hard at the structure of local government financing, both increasing the amount of business rates retention to 75% and introducing a new needs-based formula that takes into account updated needs and resources. I know his Committee will play a huge part in making sure that we get that right for Warwickshire and for the country.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): Over the years, I have strongly supported the pressure we have brought to bear on local authorities to improve efficiency and bear down on waste, and I am sure that elsewhere in the country there are examples of where more needs to be done. In the south-west, however, my impression is that the finances of Devon, Plymouth and many other local authorities have been cut to the bone. I think there is an opportunity for the Government to be more generous with efficient local authorities in the south-west to enable them to make sure their priorities are delivered.

Rishi Sunak: I pay tribute to the work of local government across the country. Local authorities have done a commendable job over the past few years of delivering high quality services in a difficult financial climate. I thank them, as I know their constituents do. On my hon. Friend’s point, I look forward to the representations from Devon and the south-west as we reform local government financing through the fair funding formula which is coming soon.

24. [904312] Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): On 4 July, the Secretary of State said to the House that he would help, with every precaution, local authorities dealing with the cladding problem across our country following the Grenfell Tower fire. Why, despite over 41 local authorities asking for that help and the Department giving £517 million back to the Treasury, has he not been able to find the money to help those poor worried people who are in those buildings as we speak?

Rishi Sunak: The Department is in discussions with multiple local authorities on the requirements to improve the safety of buildings. My understanding is that the Department has not said no to any local authority thus far that is seeking flexibility with those plans.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My own council in Derbyshire has seen £180 million—over half of its budget—cut in the past seven years. It cannot now offer enough money for social care packages for terminally ill people to receive care in their own home. They are being forced to die in hospital away from their loved ones. What will the Minister do to make sure that councils receive the proper funding that they need to be able to free up hospital beds and support families in the most urgent need?

Rishi Sunak: As we have been discussing, the Government have put extra financial resources into social care. It is pleasing to see that over the past year, delayed transfers of care across England attributable to social care have fallen by 34%, showing that the resources we are putting in are making a difference on the ground.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Since 2010, Hull City Council has been forced to cut its children’s services budget by £37.2 million, which means that it has not had the money that it has needed for early intervention support for families. It is no surprise that the number of looked-after children in Hull has increased by 140—that is 140 children’s lives changed forever. Will the Minister please give authorities such as Hull City Council more money, so that they can give those families support when they need it, before they enter crisis?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the important work that prevention plays. Nobody wants to see a child in need in those circumstances, which is why this Government have committed almost £1 billion to the troubled families programme over this period in the spending review. As recent results have shown, that is reducing the number of children in need after heavy intervention from their key workers in the programme.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, the respected National Audit Office published its report on the financial sustainability of local authorities. It made clear the significant challenges faced by councils and the vital services that they deliver. Can the Secretary of State prove that he is on the side of local councils and place in the House of Commons Library any submissions that he has made to the Chancellor ahead of the spring statement?

Rishi Sunak: I also read the National Audit Office report with interest. I was pleased to see that it made very positive comments about the Department’s work in getting to grips with the challenges across local government and making sure that the sector is properly resourced and looks forward to the reviews that are being put in place to improve funding and business rates retention.

Council Housing

13. Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): What resources he is providing to local authorities to build council housing.

The Minister for Housing (Domnic Raab): The Government are committed to delivering a new generation of council homes, and we are providing local authorities with the tools and resources to deliver them.

Clive Efford: In 2009-10, the last Labour Government had 40,000 housing starts in one year. This Government have financed 199 in the last six months. Given that we
have such a shortage of social housing and a homelessness crisis, how do the Government explain this risible performance?

**Dominic Raab**: For the record on the hon. Gentleman’s figures, local authorities have built over 10,000 homes since 2010-11 compared with under 3,000 in the 13 years of the last Labour Government. We are restless to do much more, and that is why we are raising the housing revenue account borrowing cap by up to £1 billion to make sure that we spur local house building as far and as wide as we can.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Is it in the interests of the private sector to build in sufficient quantity as to achieve a reduction in price?

**Dominic Raab**: It is a good question, and probably one for a symposium with everyone from developers to planners. The reality is that we want to see a stabilisation in house prices. We need to build more homes and deal with some of the demand issues that have been raised. There is no single answer; we have to yank every lever at our disposal 20% or 30% harder.

**Support for Local Government**

14. **Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of his Department’s support for local government.  

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government** (Jake Berry): The 2018-19 settlement sees a real-terms increase in resources for local government over the next two years, increasing from £44.3 billion to £45.6 billion.

**Edward Argar**: My hon. Friend will be aware that under Governments of both parties, Leicestershire has had one of the lowest per head of population funding settlements in the country. Will he ensure that as the new funding system is consulted on and brought in, it addresses this issue and provides fair funding for Leicestershire, alongside his Department continuing to support our councils in driving further efficiencies and service improvements?

**Jake Berry**: In particular for Leicestershire but for all councils, there could be no better champion than my hon. Friend of fairer funding. What steps is he taking to support local authorities to fulfil their statutory duties in relation to children in care.

**Children in Care**

15. **Ged Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to support local authorities to foster their statutory duties relating to children in care.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government** (Rishi Sunak): Over the spending review period, councils will receive more than £20 billion to deliver local services. This money is largely not ring-fenced; so local authorities can prioritise where they see fit, including for their statutory duties relating to children in care.

**Ged Killen**: With the education disparity between looked-after and non-looked-after children being so wide, what more does the Minister believe local authorities can do to bridge the gap?

**Rishi Sunak**: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point about the outcomes for children in care. The Government are consulting and are shortly to introduce the care leavers covenant, which will look to support companies, charities and local government to bring care leavers into employment after they leave care, and we are strengthening corporate parenting provisions under the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

**Land Banking**

17. **Chris Ruane** (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle the practice of land banking.

**The Minister for Housing** (Dominic Raab): Over 1 million homes have been delivered since 2010, but we are taking forward a range of reforms to build even more homes more swiftly, including under the national planning policy framework, which was published last week.
Chris Ruane: Two weeks ago, I asked the Department for the number of houses that will not be built because of land banking, and the answer came back:

“The Department does not hold the requested information.”

How can the Minister crack down on land banking if he has no information? I believe that the Minister does have that information, and I urge him to publish it so that he can monitor the builders and we can monitor his performance.

Dominic Raab: I welcome that scrutiny. It is very difficult to establish a negative in the way the hon. Gentleman suggests, but I can reassure him, first, that we have the housing delivery test in the NPPF, which will focus local authorities and developers on the delivery of new homes, and, secondly, that there is the review by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) of build-out rates, which will squarely address the point he is concerned about.

Devolution to Towns and Cities

18. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to devolve power to towns and cities.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): For areas that have not agreed deals so far, we aim to be able to provide clarity on how best to take forward their ambitions for devolution and local growth over the coming months.

Martin Vickers: The Minister will be aware that the Greater Lincolnshire deal collapsed last year, despite its having the support of an overwhelming number of the local authorities. Will the Minister look favourably on a revised scheme from a smaller number of authorities in the county?

Jake Berry: Devolution could almost be regarded as the golden thread of Brexit. If we want to take back control, we should bring powers not just from Brussels to London but from London back to our regions. Last Friday, I met borough and county councils in both Gainsborough and the city of Lincoln, and I was struck by the pent-up demand for devolution in Lincolnshire. I suggest that my hon. Friend use his considerable leadership role to drive forward devolution in his area.

Topical Questions

T1. [904314] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Yesterday, we marked Mother’s Day, a few days after International Women’s Day and the 100th anniversary of women getting the vote. Hon. Members will want to join me in applauding the exceptional women who make this country great, including our Prime Minister, who last week launched bold and ambitious reforms of planning rules to help to build the homes this country needs. I am pleased to announce that since my last departmental oral questions the homelessness reduction taskforce has met for the first time and that the Government have confirmed their support for the national war memorial honouring Sikh servicemen.

Tom Pursglove: Corby and East Northamptonshire have been at the forefront of the building of new homes, which is entirely in line with the agenda set out by the Prime Minister last week, but can my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents that the appropriate infrastructure will accompany those homes at all times?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of infrastructure to the building of the homes that we need. That is why the housing infrastructure fund is so important. As a result of his hard work, Corby received £4 million in the first allocation, but I know that there is much more to be done, and I am listening carefully to what he says.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Nine months on from the Grenfell Tower fire, can the Secretary of State say—yes or no—whether every tower block with a social or private landlord which has Grenfell-type cladding has now been identified and tested?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue. It is, of course, absolutely key that we ensure that we are helping local councils to identify those tower blocks. When it comes to social housing, we believe that all those tower blocks, whether owned by local councils or housing associations, have been identified. We continue to work with local councils, and that includes giving them additional financial support. Just last week we gave them £1 million to make sure that they had identified every single tower block in the private sector, and they will continue to receive whatever support they need.

John Healey: I think that that was a long-winded “no”, and it was consistent with the recent building safety data release. How is it that, nine months after Grenfell, not all private tower blocks with suspect cladding have been tested? Why have only seven of 301 blocks with Grenfell-type cladding had it removed and replaced? Why has not one of the 41 councils that have asked for financial help with extra fire safety work even received an answer from the Department? The right hon. Gentleman is the Housing Secretary. What does he say to reasonable people faced with those facts who feel that he is failing the Prime Minister’s pledge in June, when she said: “My Government will do whatever it takes to...keep...people safe”?

Sajid Javid: Reasonable people understand just how important this issue is, and they do not take kindly to the right hon. Gentleman’s playing party politics with it. If he actually cared about the issue, he would not raise it in such a way. He would not use numbers and twist the facts to try to scare the public. The truth is that we are working with local authorities up and down the country to locate every single building and take remedial measures, and also helping them with funds. Despite what he has said, not a single council has been turned away. We are talking to every single council that has approached us, and we have made it clear that they will all be given the financial flexibility, if they need it, that will enable them to get the job done.
even more. I am not sure that fiddling with the criteria Labour Government. However, we are anxious to do last seven years than in the last seven years of the last half a million since 2010, and the number of affordable numbers on social housing waiting lists are down by the issue the hon. Lady raises. I would just say that the longer game the system.

We shall hear more about that this week. Secondly, the on developer contributions in particular, and the need to ensure that developers stick to their word and can no longer game the system.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I reiterate that we are raising the housing revenue account borrowing limit to £1 billion for local authorities where there is the highest need for new council housing to be built. Again, please may I ask the hon. Gentleman to encourage councils in his area to apply?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I know that my hon. Friend has a long history of being interested in this programme. He will be pleased to know that the evaluation reports published in December showed promising progress, particularly with regard to children in need. Further findings will be published in the annual report, and I look forward to discussing them at length with my hon. Friend then.

The current definition of affordable housing, introduced by the coalition Government, is set at 80% of local market rate, but when house prices are spiralling out of control, as they are in my constituency, this definition of affordable housing is a cruel joke to those on low or median income. Will the Secretary of State commit to replacing this absurd definition so that housing can be genuinely affordable to my constituents?

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): I understand the issue the hon. Lady raises. I would just say that the numbers on social housing waiting lists are down by half a million since 2010, and the number of affordable homes in total, including social housing, is higher in the last seven years than in the last seven years of the last Labour Government. However, we are anxious to do even more. I am not sure that fiddling with the criteria for how these things are measured is the answer. We need to build more homes across the board and I welcome the hon. Lady’s support in that regard.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): We are having wide discussions with all Departments across Government consulting on the UK’s shared prosperity fund, which, crucially, in a post-Brexit world, will deliver on Britain’s priorities when it comes to local growth funding.

A recent report by the Campaign to Protect Rural England says that viability assessments favour large developers over small developers and cut the number of affordable homes by 50%. Will the Minister take the strongest possible action to make sure that small and medium-sized enterprises compete on a level playing field with large developers, and that developers provide homes for those most in need?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and through our planning reforms we are putting far more rigour into the system so that plans are clear about the obligations expected for infrastructure and affordable houses, and also so that developers can be properly held to account in meeting those aspirations and commitments.

If the Government are serious about the northern powerhouse and improving connectivity between communities in the north, does the northern powerhouse Minister think TransPennine’s plans to lengthen journeys from Hull across the Pennines, and not turning up to a meeting with the city’s MPs and business leaders last week to discuss this, will help to deliver his plans for the northern powerhouse?

Jake Berry: It is extremely disappointing if TransPennine did not turn up to a meeting with Members of Parliament from the city of Hull. I hope that the hon. Lady will be encouraged, however, that we are investing £13 billion—more money than any Government in history—in our
northern transport infrastructure, and we have also set up Transport for the North, a subnational statutory transport body, which is currently consulting on a 30-year plan to improve transport across the north of England. That is how to deliver a northern powerhouse.

T10. [904323] Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): With High Speed 2 set to displace a number of tenants living in social housing in my constituency, will my hon. Friend consider whether the Rent Act 1977, which obliges councils to rehouse council tenants whose homes are subject to compulsory purchase orders, will need amending to reflect the fact that the majority of social housing stock is now owned by housing associations rather than local authorities?

Dominic Raab: I entirely understand my hon. Friend’s concerns, but I hope that I can give her some reassurance. I do not think that there is any need to amend the 1977 Act because local authorities are already obliged, through the Housing Act 1996, to consider those in need of social housing, so local authorities will make appropriate nominations to housing associations or offer tenancies in their own stock.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): March is generally regarded as the start of the illegal Traveller encampment season. Given that the hon. Members for Reading West (Alok Sharma) and for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) are no longer in their posts in the Department, what has happened to the consultation and the timescale for action that the Government promised my frustrated constituents?

Sajid Javid: It is an important issue, and we are looking to see what more we can do with the challenges that it represents. We are planning to publish a consultation and will do so as soon as possible.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): With the inspector, Mr Max Caller, will report back later this week. I raise Grenfell and cladding in a nice, non-political way? I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that there is scope for local authorities to make precisely the distinction that she mentions. I look forward to her support.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): When are we likely to get a decision on the fantastic plans for expansion at the Mall at Cribbs Causeway in my constituency? With the greatest of respect, I do not know why the Secretary of State is taking so long, because I do not know what there is not to like about thousands of new permanent jobs, more housing and better transport infrastructure.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady makes an important point but, if she looks at the detail of the new revised national planning policy framework, she will see that there is scope for local authorities to make precisely the distinction that she mentions. I look forward to her support.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Conservative-run Northamptonshire County Council has recently gone bust. Was that due to a lack of Government funding or local incompetence?

Sajid Javid: The council may not have been elected. Owing to concerns around its finances, I appointed an independent investigation weeks ago—a best-value inspection—and the inspector, Mr Max Caller, will report back later this week.

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con): The council has not gone bust. Owing to concerns around its finances, I appointed an independent investigation weeks ago—a best-value inspection—and the inspector, Mr Max Caller, will report back later this week.

Mr Speaker: It is very useful to learn about Ministers’ domestic habits, and we are grateful to the Secretary of State for providing further information on that score.

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady makes an important point but, if she looks at the detail of the new revised national planning policy framework, she will see that there is scope for local authorities to make precisely the distinction that she mentions. I look forward to her support.

Sajid Javid: I should declare an interest, because I have been shopping at Cribbs Causeway many times and it is probably my mum’s favourite shopping complex. It is a live planning issue and we are considering it in detail. It is relatively complex, but we will try to reach a decision as quickly as possible.

Steve McCabe: When are we likely to get a decision on the fantastic plans for expansion at the Mall at Cribbs Causeway in my constituency? With the greatest of respect, I do not know why the Secretary of State is taking so long, because I do not know what there is not to like about thousands of new permanent jobs, more housing and better transport infrastructure.

Sajid Javid: I am not amazed by the behaviour of Labour and the Lib Dems, because such behaviour is sadly happening throughout the country. I warmly congratulate Bromsgrove Borough Council on keeping taxes low and service delivery high, which is a reminder—so close to the local elections—that Conservative councils cost less and deliver more.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I raise Grenfell and cladding in a nice, non-political way? I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that the facts of the matter are that the Government have rightly increased the standards and that the costs should surely be borne partly by the freeholder, partly by the leaseholder and partly by the Government. Why not get the three parties together to do something about that?
Sajid Javid: We have made it clear that, when it comes to the private sector and this type of remedial work, it should take a lead from the social sector. It is the moral duty of any freeholder to meet any necessary costs. There are a number of legal issues. There is an important legal case that is going through the courts right now, so I will not comment much more, but it is something that we are keeping under review.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Councils in rural areas have received a raw deal on local government funding for many, many years, even though the cost of delivering services in rural areas is often significantly higher. Will the Minister assure me that in the local government finance review the true cost of delivering services will be considered and that rural areas get a fair deal?

Rishi Sunak: I know that my hon. Friend is a doughty champion of rural areas. I am delighted to tell him that his point will be exactly considered in the fair funding formula. I am sure that he will be heartened by the local government finance settlement, where we increase rural services delivery grant to its highest ever level.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We have three remaining questioners if each of the three agrees to ask a single-sentence question not exceeding 20 words. I call Mr Robert Courts.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I know that the Secretary of State is well aware of the requirement for infrastructure when new homes are built. What can he do to include broadband in that?

Sajid Javid: We are working with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to do just that.

Mr Speaker: He is not a lawyer for nothing. I call Julia Lopez.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Following revelations in *The Sunday Times* about fraudulent Grenfell aid claims, what assurances can my right hon. Friend offer that financial support is going only to those directly affected by this tragedy?

Sajid Javid: I will not comment on the particular claims—I am sure that my hon. Friend will understand—but it is important that both the council and the police are working together on any such alleged behaviour.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Under its new garden town status, Taunton Deane is delivering well above the national average for houses, which the Secretary of State will welcome. Does he agree that the best way to provide the infrastructure that those houses need is to succeed with the recently submitted housing infrastructure forward funding bid, put in with West Somerset Council?

Sajid Javid: Yes.

Mr Speaker: I suppose that two probably did not amount to more than 41 words. I think that we are done. Are we done? We are done.
Hate Crime

3.37 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on hate crime in light of the inflammatory letters inciting a “Punish a Muslim day” on 3 April.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Mr Speaker, as you will appreciate, the letters described in the question are part of an ongoing investigation, and as such I am not in a position to comment on them. However, the Government condemn the content of the letters as clearly abhorrent, with no place in decent society. This Government take hate crime and Islamophobia extremely seriously, and the UK has a robust legislative framework to respond to it.

Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, democracy, the rule of law, and equal rights define us as a society. The Government are determined to promote those values actively, working in partnership and alongside Muslim and, indeed, all faith communities to demonstrate that what we have in common is the best defence against extremists who would seek to divide us.

Our hate crime action plan, published in 2016, sets out our comprehensive approach to tackling hate crime. We have a strong legislative framework to tackle hate crime, including offences of inciting racial and religious hatred, and racial and religiously aggravated offences. The legislation provides equal protection under the law for all ethnic and religious groups. We have sources of expert advice on the nature and causes of hate crime through the anti-Muslim hatred working group and the independent advisory group on hate crime.

We have committed £2.4 million over three years to help to protect places of worship that have been the subject of or are vulnerable to a hate crime attack. We also committed a further £1 million following the terrible Finsbury Park terror attack in June last year, to help to protect places of worship and associated community centres that are vulnerable to attack on racial, religious or ideological grounds. So far, we have funded 45 mosques under both schemes. We have also funded Tell MAMA to record anti-Muslim hatred incidents and to support victims. From this year, we have made it mandatory for police forces to disaggregate religious hate crime data held by the police to reveal the true scale and nature of the problem, which we are determined to tackle.

Yasmin Qureshi: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. The letter calling for an attack on Muslims on 3 April offers attackers rewards, ranging from 10 points for verbal abuse, 50 points for throwing acid and 1,000 points for bombing a mosque to 2,500 points for nuking Mecca. May I remind the House that millions of Muslims fought for us in the two world wars, including members of my family? Figures show that the number of Islamophobia hate crimes has increased by 40%, with 1,678 anti-Muslim hate crimes reported in London in the year up to January 2018. Can the Minister therefore explain why no Minister in the past eight years has made a speech on the rise of anti-Muslim hatred?

Recent surveys have shown that 50% of the British population believe that Islam is a threat to western democracy and more than 30% of young children believe that Muslims are taking over England. Given that such anti-Muslim views have gained such traction, what are the Government going to do to help to prevent the growth of such extreme views, which appear to have come from parts of the print, broadcast and social media? What concrete steps are the Government going to take to tackle this growth in hate crimes and hatred against Muslims? Will the Minister set out the amount of funding provided by the Home Office to tackle each form of bigotry?

I think every Member in this House will accept that there has been a sharp rise in the far right movement in Europe and beyond, with the USAs President retweeting far right material. This is a really urgent situation and it needs to be urgently tackled. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response as to what concrete steps are going to be taken to deal with it.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her urgent question. May I make it clear that this Government want to give a strong message of support to Muslims people across the UK that we are committed to their safety and security? I say to anyone who has received this letter, or a similar communication, please contact the police, where you will be treated with utmost seriousness and action will be taken.

I now move on to the points the hon. Lady made. The issue of anti-Muslim and far right extremism is of course a focus for the Government. As she knows, the Prevent strategy tackles extremism. It does not tackle Muslim extremism in and of itself; it tackles extremism, full stop. Sadly, more than a quarter of referrals in the Prevent strategy in 2015-16 concerned far right extremism. So this Government, and in particular this Prime Minister, with all the experience she brings to her position following her time in the Home Office, are focused on tackling extremism and radicalisation and how they affect any part of our community. That is precisely why we are refreshing the hate crime action plan this year.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Just want to put on the record the fact that the mayor of Broxtowe, Halima Khaled, just happens to be a Muslim. She happens to be the first person of colour to be mayor of Broxtowe and she is its first Muslim mayor. She also happens to be a Tory. She has completed nearly one year in office, during which time she has had a warm welcome wherever she has gone in my borough, and rightly so. People are sick and tired of hate crime and Islamophobia. This is absolutely no longer to be tolerated. I commend the Minister for everything she has said in her statement, and I do believe this Government take this very seriously. We are not really talking about a hate crime here; it is actually an act of blatant incitement to terrorism. In any event, I am looking over at the co-chair of the all-party group on British Muslims, the hon. Member for Ilford North (West Streeling). We have worked together on this, and I am sure he will agree when I say that the time has now come for a proper legal definition of Islamophobia. Does the Minister agree?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for her impassioned plea for recognition throughout the country of the role not only of her local mayor, but of many
other people in public life who happen to practise the Muslim religion as part of their way of life and who contribute so very much to our community. I put on record my thanks to her local mayor.

There are many definitions of Islamophobia, but most people tend to adhere to the one used by the Runnymede Trust. We do not accept the need for a definitive definition, but we know that Islamophobia is clearly recognised and that we have very effective monitoring of race-hate crimes. Considerable work is done on these matters by Tell MAMA and the anti-Muslim hatred working group.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing it.

The despicable sentiments behind these sickening letters has caused revulsion throughout our communities. Although we can be confident that, thanks to the tireless dedication of community leaders, charities, faith groups and civil society, such deliberate attempts to divide us will not succeed, this act will have struck fear into the heart of communities—indeed, that was the intention. It is absolutely an incitement to violence and it cannot go unpunished.

As we have heard, hate crimes are rising nationwide. In London alone, there has been a fivefold increase in attacks on Muslims in the past year. As the outgoing counter-terror chief Mark Rowley has said, the threat from the extreme right wing is significant and requires urgent attention. We have seen the murder of our colleague and friend Jo Cox, the attack at Finsbury Park mosque, the proscription of National Action, the jailing of the leaders of Britain First, and the reports from the Anderson review, which suggested that the extreme right wing is engaged in credible attack planning, including bomb making. There is now overwhelming evidence that the threat from the extreme right is growing increasingly violent. We have to be clear that by threatening members of our diverse communities, these people are also a threat to our national security through their anti-democratic, dehumanising and murderous beliefs.

Given the overwhelming evidence, it is clear that so-called domestic extremism needs to be dealt with as a first-order threat, so will the Minister reassure us that, in line with the Anderson review recommendations, the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre will start to produce national threat assessments of domestic extremism? Will she increase the role for MI5, JTAC and the counter-terrorism network in the monitoring and handling of investigations of domestic extremism? Is it not time to update the Contest strategy to reflect the growing threat from the extreme right?

More broadly, can the Minister assure us that counter-terrorism policing has the resources it needs? The Government’s funding settlement last month gave only half what the police requested for counter-terror purposes, while the police and our intelligence services are facing an unprecedented threat from terrorism in all its forms.

We all deplore these despicable letters. They are an attempt to divide us; in that, they will not succeed. We must be united as a House and as a country in bearing down on the insidious beliefs contained within these letters and be absolutely clear on how we are going to bring together the police, schools, colleges and all authorities to stand up to hate crime and terrorism in every single one of their forms. Finally, we must ensure that all of us, as elected politicians, are at all times responsible in our language and rhetoric and never seek to embolden those who hold such insidious and extremist views.

Victoria Atkins: I am sure that everyone in the House agrees with the hon. Lady, particularly on that last point about the importance of using language very carefully. She asked me about police resources; of course, we have increased them and, as she will know, the Home Secretary reviews those resources constantly. We ask the police whether they have the resources that they need, and the Home Secretary acts accordingly. May I undertake to write to the hon. Lady specifically on JTAC and her other queries? Finally, let me say that it is gratifying to see so many Members present, unified in condemning these dreadful letters and their sentiments and in our determination to tackle them.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Hate crime in all its forms is to be condemned, as is this letter. Another group that is affected by growing hate crime is the Jewish community, and the Community Security Trust is having to go to ever greater lengths to protect local Jewish community centres. Can we ensure that all these forms of hate crime are combated as far as possible?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Of course, any group of people who are the victims of hate crime as a result of their religious beliefs deserve our sympathy and also our action. I, like him, condemn any form of anti-Semitism. I know that the police are as focused on that form of crime as they are on any other form of religious hate crime.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing this urgent question, and reassure her, and the rest of the House, that the Scottish National party joins in the condemnation of Islamophobia in the strongest possible terms? We believe that there is no excuse for any sort of hate crime, and we were as concerned as everyone else in this House to see the significant rise in hate crime statistics in England and Wales last year. We note that that followed a spike in hate crime figures around the time of the EU referendum, and as others have said, this is happening alongside a significant rise in right-wing extremism.

In Scotland, the police are committed to making victims, witnesses and partner agencies feel more confident in reporting hate crime, and they do so through a variety of methods, including a network of third party reporting centres. In Scotland, a senior judge has been appointed to lead an independent review of hate crime legislation, and he will be reporting to the Scottish Government later this year. What reassurance can the Minister give us that similar steps are being taken in the rest of the UK where hate crime is rising, and in particular that similar steps are being taken to tackle the specific problem at issue here, which is Islamophobia?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her question and, indeed, for her contribution in relation to what is happening in Scotland. We very much
look at how we tackle hate crime, particularly through our hate crime action plan, which was published in 2016 and will be refreshed this year. Its range of actions include: funding for security for places of worship; the disaggregation of religion-based hate crime data; taking further action in relation to education so that teachers can have sometimes difficult conversations with their students about beliefs and words; and funding programmes through the Anne Frank Trust and Streetwise. We are determined to ensure that our action in relation to hate crime is up to date and current.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): As someone who visited a Syrian refugee camp in Malatya in Turkey over the weekend, I find it a little offensive that a Labour Member has said that no Conservative Minister had ever actually condemned any kind of anti-Muslim extremism. Is the Minister aware that her equivalent at the Department for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) correctly. As I have said, the record of both the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers on the issue of tackling anti-Muslim sentiments is pretty clear. It may be that the hon. Lady can clarify her remarks at a later stage.

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend. I must say that I was not sure whether I had heard the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) correctly. As I have said, the record of both the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers on the issue of tackling anti-Muslim sentiments is pretty clear. It may be that the hon. Lady can clarify her remarks at a later stage.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I do not think that the previous question represented the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) was making. I hope that we can address this issue as a united Parliament, and not in a way that is divided. We should all stand together against this kind of vile threat and this illegal incitement to violence. Our whole Parliament, the police and our communities across the country should want to stand firm with Muslim families and Muslim communities against this kind of vile Islamophobia, because we know from history that an attack on some of us is an attack on all of us. That is why we stand firm.

What has the Home Office done since I raised last week the prevalence of National Action illegal propaganda videos on YouTube—still—and also, I discover, on Twitter and on Facebook? We know that the former counter-terror chief has warned of online radicalisation and the rise of far right extremism, and our Select Committee has heard in our inquiry about the serious issues around Islamophobia and hate crime. The Minister will know that we are allowing social media companies to collude with these far right extremists if action is not taken to take down this kind of vile illegal propaganda.

Victoria Atkins: The right hon. Lady knows the work that the Home Secretary is doing with the large technology companies to improve their reaction. I think that pretty much everyone in this place—and certainly everyone outside—agrees that technology companies need to do more to remove these hateful pieces of incitement from their platforms much more quickly and working with police. I am sure that we have agreement on that.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will my hon. Friend reassure the House that those spreading this fear and hatred, in whatever forum, should be investigated by the police and, where appropriate, dealt with severely by the courts?

Victoria Atkins: Yes, of course. As I said, I must not comment on this case because it is a live police investigation. The principle is that if there is an incident of hate crime, the victim must—please—report it to the police, so that they can do all they can to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): These letters are abhorrent and are causing immense distress across communities around the country. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) has indicated, this hate crime is being amplified via the internet. Social media companies are still taking too little action. I attended a roundtable co-ordinated by two Departments just before Christmas, but we are still to see action. I can tell the Minister about a case that went to court and a man was jailed for two years for the far right material that he put online. But that material is still online, as remains the case in many examples across the country. What action are the Government taking to ensure that we do not enflame the tensions in our communities by what is seen online?

Victoria Atkins: I know that the hon. Lady has sadly been the victim of much hatred online, as have other Members. We are very clear that it is our expectation that technology companies will, in accordance with the law, remove such material as and when it is brought to their attention. We have had some progress, as the technology companies are getting better at this, but I do not for a moment pretend that we have the full response we would like, which is to see these posts taken down as quickly as possible. That is the Home Secretary’s expectation when she meets the technology companies.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Has a national unit been established to check on hate crime, identify the people who are dealing in it and bring them to justice?

Victoria Atkins: We take the view that hate crime is a matter for the whole community, given that it can take so many forms. It is not restricted to one’s religion; the five characteristics are set out clearly in the hate crime legislation. We ensure that the police and others are trained to spot this crime when it occurs and to deal with it seriously and, I hope, sensitively.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): These letters are nothing short of a sick and cowardly attempt to divide our communities. We are proud of our communities living side by side in harmony. A clear message must be sent from across this House that we will never cower before any form of extremism and we will never allow it to threaten the very fabric of our society. May I urge the Minister to ensure that this Government do not sit idly by and let it happen? In this great time of need, allowing the propagation of such awful hatred would send the worst message of all.

Victoria Atkins: I would hope that the hon. Lady has understood from my reaction that the Government are not sitting idly by. We are this year refreshing the hate
crime action plan because it has to keep up to date with the new threats faced by all different types of people and communities. I can assure her that we take these allegations very seriously—as, indeed, we take very seriously the allegations of anti-Semitism, online hatred and so on that we have heard about in the Chamber today—and that the police do as well.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): The rising tide of creeping Islamophobia and anti-Jewish sentiment should concern us all. How is improving the recording of this hate crime helping us to track what is going on in our society and how we can tackle it?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. Of course, increasing the amount of data helps to give us answers and helps to direct our resources in the right way. We very much hope that disaggregating the different types of hate crime that exist will help individual constabularies to work out how better to prioritise their resources to deal with them.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The level of hate and violence against Muslims has become utterly intolerable. For years, many of our constituencies have faced the onslaught of threats from the English Defence League, Britain First and others. What action will the Minister take, first, to provide protection for the communities who feel particularly under threat on 3 April and in the run-up to 3 April and, secondly, to proscribe groups that are actively seeking to incite violence and hatred across our communities?

Victoria Atkins: Again, the hon. Lady will understand that I must not comment on the investigation going on at the moment, given that it is, by definition, a live investigation. Communities that may be affected by any such communication will be uppermost in the police’s mind with regard to protection and their vulnerability. Tackling far right extremism more generally is part of a cross-Government programme that also supports victims of such behaviour. This is where the Prevent strategy, which is a safeguarding programme for people who may be vulnerable to radicalisation, has such an impact, because, sadly, a quarter of the referrals to it in 2015-16 involved far right extremism. The strategy is about trying to lead people away from the path of radicalisation, so that they do not commit these terrible acts.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): This House is at its best when it comes together to condemn evil action and we are not trying to score political points against one another. I think that we can all unite on this letter. We do not yet know who wrote it. For all we know, it is some sad individual in a bedsit playing with his computer, or perhaps it is something far more serious, but we are all right to condemn it as an incitement to violence, especially when it calls on people to throw acid in people’s faces.

May I ask the House to think of the office of the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin)? Earlier today, there was an incident in Norman Shaw North that involved him and his staff which may or may not be connected—but we think it might be—with this letter. We must pull together to ensure that this does not happen, not only here but throughout the country.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this. I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House are with the Member of Parliament concerned and his members of staff, although I have received a note—I hope that it is accurate—saying that the package found in Norman Shaw North was not hazardous. That must be of significant relief to all those concerned. As ever, we give our sincere thanks to the police and others who went to the rescue of those members of staff when they found the package.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It was Friday night when I started to receive reports from residents in Walthamstow that they had received one of these letters, with the fear and the terror that that caused, at the very point when I was helping other residents to report anti-Semitic graffiti that they had found in our community. Will the Minister join me in welcoming the work that Tell MAMA and the Community Security Trust are doing to support these groups? Does she agree that we have to do more than condemn these individual instances? When we see Steve Bannon come to Europe and tell people that they should be proud to be called a racist, we in this House must speak up for the communities that we represent and the power of diversity and immigration to enrich all our lives. I tell the Minister: the people in Walthamstow need and demand nothing less from this Government.

Victoria Atkins: They are getting it. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for setting out the concerns of her constituents; she has highlighted the fear that people must have felt when they received those letters. She is absolutely right to say that Tell MAMA is an organisation that is universally recognised as playing a very important role in this field. I am told that from 1 January 2015 to 31 December 2015, 2,622 anti-Muslim hate incidents were reported to Tell MAMA by victims, witnesses, third parties or the police. That shows us the scale—certainly three years ago—of these worrying incidents of hate crime that we are facing in this country. We support Tell MAMA to the tune of £1.9 million, and its work is highly valued.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate colleagues, but I would just remind the House that there is a further urgent question after this, and then no fewer than four ministerial statements, so there is a premium on extreme brevity from Back and Front Benchers alike.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I, too, condemn the despicable letters that have been sent out. Following a recent incident in my constituency that I would classify as racial abuse, will my hon. Friend reassure my constituent and the whole House that that crime will be classified correctly and not just washed away and classified as a public order offence?

Victoria Atkins: Any such issue will be an operational matter for my hon. Friend’s local police force, but I know that she is a good advocate for her local community
and I am sure that she will be asking searching questions of the police and the police and crime commissioner to ensure that that alleged offence receives the attention it deserves.

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Government are right to say that this is a hate crime that has no place in our modern society. I want to pay tribute to our communities in Hounslow, which have a track record of working together to build understanding between all our communities. Will the Minister confirm that the police will have the resources they need to work together effectively and fast across the country to track where these horrific letters are coming from, who is disseminating them and who is behind them, and will she ensure that our schools and communities have the resources they need to stop this activity in its tracks and to support those communities that will rightly feel at risk and under threat?

**Victoria Atkins:** The hon. Lady has identified the fact that this has an impact not just on the people who receive these letters in their homes but also on the wider neighbourhood. I again ask anyone who has received any of these sorts of communications to please report them to the police. The Home Office is in constant communication with the police to ensure that they have the resources they need to tackle this.

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): I join my hon. Friend the Minister in condemning these letters. In view of the similarities between anti-Muslim hate crime and the anti-Semitism that we have seen, will she reassure me that the action plan proposed by the Government will be adequate?

**Victoria Atkins:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. He has a long and established record of supporting our Jewish communities. Yes, the hate crime action plan covers all forms of hatred, as defined by the legislation, and of course, sadly, anti-Semitism forms part of that.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): These appalling letters have to be seen in the context of the flames of prejudice being fanned in mainstream newspapers and in the comments made by mainstream politicians against their Muslim opponents, as well as by bystanders, who are just as complicit when they see prejudice, either in person or online on Facebook or other social media platforms, and instead of tackling it, they choose to look the other way. Will the Minister make a commitment to the House that the Government will not only take action on online publishers of this kind of extremism, but, in the weeks leading up to the first week of April, ensure that every mosque and Muslim community centre in the country receives a visit from their police to give them adequate security advice, to ensure that the Muslim community know that the authorities are 100% with them and on their side?

**Victoria Atkins:** The anti-Muslim hatred working group brings together all parties from across Government and further afield to try to tackle this specific form of hate crime. One of its initial achievements was to work with the Society of Editors to tackle anti-Muslim hatred and, more recently, with the Independent Press Standards Organisation to develop training for editors and journalists to tackle the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media.

On the hon. Gentleman’s point about ensuring that mosques are visited in the run-up to the date mentioned in the letter, we will happily send letters to each chief constable to ensure they are aware of this. It is a matter for chief constables, but we expect that mosques will be protected.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): I join my hon. Friend in condemning these letters and welcome the £2.4 million that the Government have devoted to protecting places of worship from hate crime. Can she expand on how that will work and give assurances that it will be given all the back-up it needs?

**Victoria Atkins:** I am happy to do that, and it follows on well from the previous question. The Government have committed £2.4 million over three years to help protect places of worship that have been subject to or are vulnerable to a hate crime attack. We hope that that money will help local communities to feel safe in their places of worship.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): You do not have to have taught media studies or be a Muslim to have noticed that anti-Muslim sentiment is becoming quite common in much of our tabloid printed press. As well as dealing with the online platforms that spread this kind of hatred, will the Minister also have a word with her friends in the Tory press? These things feed people like those in Britain First and the English Defence League, one of whom has even made a video calling for my head.

**Victoria Atkins:** I hope that everyone in the House knows that, as the Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability, I am of course against language that leads to the incitement of violence or hate crime. I hope that this debate has sent a clear message to the people with whom the hon. Lady is concerned.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): As one House, we all find these letters abhorrent, and our constituents will feel exactly the same. Can my hon. Friend assure the House that police forces work collaboratively to tackle such hate crime?

**Victoria Atkins:** I thank my hon. Friend, who, as always, shows an interest in policing matters. We expect police forces to work collaboratively, particularly in the online field. Of course, online extremism and radicalisation know no geographical boundary, so the police are well versed, sadly, in working together to tackle this form of hatred.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): There has been horror and revulsion at these letters in Cardiff South and Penarth, not just from the Muslim community but across the community. I am very proud of our record in standing up against hate crime across the faiths and across communities in the diverse community in which we live. Does the Minister agree that words from social media companies are now simply not enough? Does she share my deep concern that representatives of Twitter, Google and Facebook
attended the Home Affairs Committee and said to me that they were not routinely searching for proscribed organisations? That is a basic thing they should be doing. What is she saying to the social media companies?

Victoria Atkins: The Home Secretary is absolutely focused on the conduct of technology companies and the assistance they can give to the police both nationally and locally in taking down this abhorrent material. Sadly, this goes across the line with not just hate crime but online child sexual exploitation, terrorism and so on. A great piece of work is going on at the moment between the Home Secretary and those companies to ensure that their reactions are as speedy as the public expect.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What these letters show more than anything is the gross ignorance, instability, bile and prejudice of the perpetrators, who hide behind the cloak of anonymity. As the Home Affairs Committee report has shown, that anonymity is even more damaging online. Is it not time not just to do more to take this material down once it has been posted but to stop it being posted in the first place and make sure that the identity of the people doing the posting has to be revealed before they have these accounts?

Victoria Atkins: The Home Secretary was in California recently to discuss these matters with the online technology companies. We are looking at the issue of anonymity in terms of the internet safety strategy, because we are very clear that we want the United Kingdom to be the safest place in the world online.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The vile, abhorrent letters received by individuals across the country, including in my constituency, are just the latest addition in a long line of Islamophobic hate crimes. Sadly, the number of such crimes has been growing for several years, encouraged by the undeniable rise of the far right and endorsed directly and indirectly by leaders and powerful figures across the globe. Muslims are often the targets of hate crimes, but the targets can just as easily be those of another religion or another race. With an increase in religious hate crime of 267% since 2011, why has the Government’s record on tackling the root causes of hate crime been so poor?

Victoria Atkins: Again, reflecting on the overall tone of this urgent question, I will not rise to the bait, as it were, in that question. Frankly, I think we can all work together to call out hate crime when it happens. We have already today, sadly, heard the forms it can take, including anti-Semitism. Last week, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) spoke about the experience of misogyny; it is not yet a hate crime, but was the cause of much debate last week. We are very clear, and I think the House has been very clear today, that these letters and their sentiments are wholly abhorrent and are to be condemned.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What practical support is being provided to help the targets and victims of hate crime?

Victoria Atkins: First, we of course want victims to report their experience to the police. The police are sadly aware of these events. I hope the police are trusted by the groups of people concerned, who will receive a concerned and sensitive welcome from the police when reporting these crimes. As I have said already, there is much that we are doing in the hate crime action plan, and in trying to tackle the root of radicalisation so that these awful sentiments are not expressed in the first place.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): With the number of anti-Muslim hate crimes and anti-Semitic hate crimes rising at such a shocking rate, these anonymous letters can really strike fear into whole communities. Is it not also the case, however, that anonymous social media is a similar problem on a daily basis? Do we not now have to confront the question of anonymity in spreading such bile? Will the Minister at least address this?

Victoria Atkins: I have very much heard what the House has said. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the internet safety strategy was published last year. I will ensure that the sentiments of the House on anonymity are very much heard by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): What makes you British is not what you look like, where your parents were from or how you worship, but the contribution that you make to our country. Nowhere has the contribution made by British Muslims been greater than in the west midlands, which is why I will be spending 3 April—it has been identified as a day of hate—visiting as many mosques and community centres across the region as possible to ensure that Muslims in the west midlands have my support and solidarity and to show them that I am on their side. I hope other Members of the House will be doing the same.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman has set out beautifully the values that bind this House and our country together. I wish him luck on his visits across his constituency to the many mosques in the west midlands.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I welcome the funding that the Minister has promised for safeguarding mosques, but Muslims do not gather only at places of worship. What reassurance can she give the many Muslim community groups, schools and places where children gather—as well as places that are not specifically Muslim, but where there are groups of Muslims—that they will have funding for extra security, should that be needed, in Bristol West?

Victoria Atkins: As I have said, the Government have not only pledged or, indeed, spent up to £2.4 million over three years, but have funded Tell MAMA, which is a very important intelligence tool, as it were, to help the police to understand where they should best focus their resources. If there are particular areas in the hon. Lady’s constituency about which she has concerns, I ask her to ensure that her chief constable and her police and crime commissioner know, because they are the ones who must make the operational decisions.
Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My constituents are very worried about the rise in hate crime. Is the Minister satisfied that, in light of the significant cuts, Dewsbury and, indeed, West Yorkshire and further afield have the necessary police resources to investigate and apprehend those responsible for this abhorrent crime?

Victoria Atkins: It is about how resources are spent, which is particularly pertinent to the question of West Yorkshire. I cannot recall the figure off the top of my head, but I seem to recall that West Yorkshire has several million pounds of reserves in savings. Of course, how that money is spent is a matter for the elected police and crime commissioner. I very much hope he will take up the Home Office’s funding settlement suggestion of increasing council tax to ensure more money to deal with the resourcing issue.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I have been approached by many in my constituency who are deeply concerned about these letters. As with last year’s Muslim ban, they feel unfairly targeted and under siege. Although this is an obvious opportunity to target internet companies, social media websites and so on, this was snail mail. May I press the Minister to pick up on the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra)? Will she update us on who sent these letters and what is going on to find out how to stop them? Will she reassure my constituents that once those people are apprehended, they will feel the full weight of the law?

Victoria Atkins: I must not and cannot go into more detail on the specifics of the ongoing police investigation, because the hon. Lady will not want me or anyone else to inadvertently endanger any future prosecution. I can reassure her, however, that the case is being investigated very carefully and that the full force of the law is being applied.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): That anti-Semitic and Islamophobic hate crime is on the rise is well documented, but we also know that there is significant under-reporting—often by women, in my experience. Hijab-wearing Muslim women are often most vulnerable because of their visibility. On the need to reach women in communities and, as my Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) has said, not just in mosques, what assurances can the Minister give that the Government are doing what they can to get out into those communities the message about the need to report all incidents of hate crime?

Victoria Atkins: I will not and cannot go into more detail on the specifics of the ongoing police investigation. However, I can confirm that the Crown Prosecution Service is working with the police at local and national level to understand the reasons for the overall fall in prosecutions in 2016 and 2017. The Crown Prosecution Service that, against that increase in incidents, there was a drop by more than 1,000 in the number of prosecutions in 2016-17. What is the Minister doing with the CPS and the police to ensure that that is reversed?

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): May I, along with everybody else, condemn this absolutely abhorrent letter? It has been reported that since the EU referendum there has been a spike in hate crime, both in Islamophobia and in anti-Semitism, coming from the hard right and the hard left. It has also been reported by the Crown Prosecution Service that, against that increase in incidents, there was a drop by more than 1,000 in the number of prosecutions in 2016-17. What is the Minister doing with the CPS and the police to ensure that that is reversed?

Victoria Atkins: The drop in referrals, recorded last year, has had an impact on the number of completed prosecutions in 2016 and 2017. The Crown Prosecution Service is working with the police at local and national level to understand the reasons for the overall fall in referrals in the past two years. The message to spread around our constituencies to people who have been a victim of hate crime is please report it, because that way we can try to do something about it.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Police forces such as Greater Manchester that have long targeted hate crime, and who work hard with the CST on anti-Semitism and with the Muslim community on Islamophobia, recognise that community policing is central to challenging
hate crime. Will the Minister take that message back?
Community policing is about trust, and trust is fundamental. We need our community police.

Victoria Atkins: Of course local policing is important, but we also have to recognise that we cannot just rely on policing alone to reach into communities and build relationships. That is why organisations such as Tell MAMA and others are such an important part of the overall picture in ensuring that when people feel they have been victims of crime they know what to do, know where to go, and feel they will be listened to and their experiences acted upon.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): It is clear that the whole House condemns the cowards who are sending out this letter. However, it is not just those sending this letter who are causing hate and it is not just groups like Britain First. At the end of last month, my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and I received a letter from the British National party, which included a racist poem. On the back of the letter it said that unless action was taken today

“Rebecca will be in an ethnic minority group when she grows up”

Will the Minister condemn the actions of the BNP and say there should be no place in British society for political parties that peddle such hate?

Victoria Atkins: I am absolutely clear that the BNP and all the other far right organisations described today have no place in our society. Frankly, their showing at the ballot box, when they dare to stand for election, shows how little truck the British public have with them.

Treatment of House of Commons Staff

4.27 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) (Urgent Question): To ask the Leader of the House about the treatment of House of Commons staff.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. She and I worked together on the cross-party working group on an independent complaints and grievance policy. I thank her sincerely for her work on it.

Reports of bullying of House staff are of huge concern to me and to hon. Members right across the House. I am committed to stamping out all kinds of bullying and harassment in Parliament in order to create an environment in which everyone feels safe and is treated with the respect and dignity they deserve. We can only achieve our goals in this House with the support of others. A great debt of gratitude is owed by us all to the House staff who support us behind the scenes.

I myself have worked with a large number of civil servants and staff of the House during my time in Parliament. From the Clerks of the Treasury Committee to my private offices at the Treasury, Energy and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the team in the Leader’s office and the excellent secretariat who supported the working group, I have always been impressed by, and am very grateful for, the dedication, professionalism, high standards and courtesy that all the civil servants and House staff have shown. I know that many right hon. and hon. Members across the House, and in the other place, would say the same.

The House will be aware that significant progress has been made in recent months, following the shocking reports at the end of last year of sexual harassment, bullying and intimidation in this place. The working group I chaired, set up by the Prime Minister, has now published its report, and it has been agreed by both Houses. The work streams are now in place to get the new independent complaints procedure up and running within the next three months.

The hon. Lady will recall that the working group wanted House staff to be included in the new complaints procedure from day one. However, following evidence taken, and in consultation with the trade union representatives of House staff, it was agreed that the staff of the House would not immediately be covered by the new independent procedure, because they were already covered by the House’s own Respect policy. It was believed that the Respect policy was working well and that House staff were satisfied with it. However, it was acknowledged during the working group evidence sessions that the Respect policy did not cover complaints of sexual harassment and violence. The aspiration of the working group is to take up the question of whether House staff should have immediate access to the new independent complaints procedure now that the report has been agreed by both Houses. Following the “Newsnight” allegations and others, it is clear that the Respect policy may not be sufficient to protect House staff.

I am aware that, today, the Clerk of the House of Commons has written to House staff, saying that there are clearly unresolved issues over bullying and harassment,
including sexual harassment, that need to be addressed, and this will include a review of the Respect policy. The Clerk of the House of Commons has also reassured staff who wish to come forward with complaints of bullying that they will be dealt with in the proper manner, with the support of their managers and colleagues. It is right that everyone working for or with Parliament, regardless of position or seniority, should have the same rights and protections and should be held to the same high standards.

The House Commission next meets on Monday 19 March and I have given notice to my fellow members that I will be recommending a short, independently led inquiry by the House Commission looking into allegations of systemic bullying of parliamentary staff. I will propose that the inquiry should hear from past and current staff members about their experiences and help to provide them with closure wherever possible. I will also propose that it should take soundings from current and former House staff on whether the Respect policy is fit for purpose and whether House staff would be better served by having access to the new independent complaints and grievance policy from day one. Mr Speaker, I am more determined than ever that we banish all kinds of harassment and bullying from this place, because make no mistake, there is a need for change.

Caroline Lucas: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent, cross-party question. This is not about party politics and it is not about political gain; it is about doing the right thing by the staff who support us on a daily basis and ensuring that the House of Commons leads by example when it comes to robustly tackling workplace bullying and sexual misconduct.

Members and the public will have been shocked by the revelations of bullying at Westminster that were highlighted by “Newsnight” last week. I commend the Leader of the House for her ongoing work to establish an independent complaints and grievance procedure. The need for that arose in part because the 2014 Respect policy did not apply to large numbers of those working in Parliament. There are now considerable grounds to assert that that same Respect policy does not have the confidence of the staff that it is intended to protect and that the new independent procedure must immediately be expanded to avoid a two-tier system.

I am grateful that the Leader of the House broadly agrees with that and I am pleased to hear about the new short inquiry, but will she also confirm specifically that there will be a presumption in favour of historical allegations being thoroughly investigated, should those affected choose to make formal complaints, either under the Respect policy or the new procedure? Will she acknowledge that the positive work that she has led to date risks being undermined if we continue to allow sanctions to be determined by a Committee on which MPs effectively hold all the power? Will she agree that the whole process, including sanctions, must be handled by an independent body? Will she revisit whether good employer and consent training as an important part of culture change should start before the next election? I think the evidence is clear that it should, and in the meantime, can she assure staff that any further complaints will be treated with the seriousness and respect that they deserve and will not be dismissed, as they were last Friday, as grotesque exaggeration?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have already mentioned, I certainly agree with the hon. Lady. It was the aspiration of the working group to cover all staff working in Parliament, including staff of the House, in our independent complaints procedure from day one, and I share her concern that we should now take steps to ensure that it does as soon as the independent policy is up and running, which we intend to be the case within three months from now.

The hon. Lady will recall that the working group has made it clear that we will deal with historical allegations, and it will be for the detailed policies and procedures of the new working group to establish how exactly that can be done. The Clerk of the House of Commons has made it clear today that he will look to reassure House staff that any historical allegations will be properly dealt with.

The hon. Lady mentioned that sanctions must be independent. That has been a core part of the work of the working group. We are now looking carefully at how that impacts on the work of the independent Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and the Standards Committee itself, on which there are both parliamentary and lay members, and that work is ongoing. In fact, I am looking forward to meeting the Standards Committee later today to start those discussions.

The hon. Lady mentions consent training. The working group was very clear that all people, not only those who employ staff in this place but those who come into contact with others, should be very clear about what constitutes consent and precisely what does not. I can assure her that I am very keen to provide the carrot to ensure that people want to take up that training, but, as the working group agreed, we did not have the levers at that time to make it compulsory. Finally, I totally share her desire to see all staff here treated with the dignity and respect that everybody in this place deserves.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I welcome what the Leader of the House said about her short inquiry? It seems to me that a good test for her to adopt would be to see that the House does what all organisations should do, which is make sure that everybody who works here, whether for Members of Parliament or the House, have the same processes and can expect to be treated according to the same high standards. I urge her to bring in that measure as soon as she can.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend, and I can assure him and all hon. Members that that is the working group’s aspiration and my personal goal.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): It is noted, Mr Speaker, that you have granted the urgent question, even though you are one of the people mentioned in media reports. No one—critics or otherwise—can deny your commitment to accountability and transparency or your attempts to move the House forward in recognition of diversity and modern customs and practice.

The Opposition take all allegations seriously. We want a workplace that accommodates and supports everyone. I do not want to comment on individual cases—it is a matter for the House authorities—but is
the Leader of the House aware of any formal complaints that have been instigated on the basis of those cases that have been reported and, if so, when? I note that she has suggested an inquiry. I am very pleased that we can have this discussion on the Commission and we look forward to that.

Some cases predate the Respect policy, and I know that, as a result of the work streams following the report of the working group on sexual harassment and bullying, that, too, is being amended and there will be a new behaviour code and procedure that covers everyone working on the estate and in our constituencies. It is imperative that all staff working here feel that they can raise any complaints and grievances immediately. Can the Leader of the House confirm that she will agree to the president of the staff side attending the steering group, which I have previously requested and support?

The working group published its report on 8 February 2018. The steering group is monitoring the work that will be carried out. I am pleased that there is now a permanent secretariat and that the further work set out in the report that needs to be done is being progressed to ensure that the complaints and grievance policy that will be put into place is fair and robust. Only when that is tested will we know if they work. There will be a continual process to refine them so that they are effective and everyone has confidence in them. Can the Leader of the House say—she mentioned three months, but we need to balance speed with making sure there is an effective process—whether this work will be completed by the three months, or at least by the summer, before the House rises?

The Labour Opposition take all complaints about sexual harassment and abuse, and discrimination, extremely seriously. We want anyone with a complaint to come forward so that all allegations can be fully investigated, and any appropriate disciplinary action taken in line with the party’s procedures.

We all have the utmost respect for the House Clerks. Any of us who have had dealings with them on the various Select Committees, as I have, know that they are experts in their field and offer vital assistance and advice to everyone. I know that everyone who works here, in whatever capacity, knows that they play a vital role in ensuring that our Parliament and our democracy thrive.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the shadow Leader of the House for what she has said, and I am grateful to her for the part that she played in the working group on setting up an independent complaints procedure. It was notable that there was unanimous support for the establishment of the procedure, and I think the whole House can be very pleased about that.

The hon. Lady asked whether the House authorities trade union representative would be invited to join the steering group. I believe that that has already happened—he has been invited to join the steering group. She asked when the procedures would be finalised. At the first meeting of the steering group last week, we set an aspiration that the bulk of the work should be done within three months. There will be a final vote in the House on necessary changes in Standing Orders, and on the adoption of the behaviour code. We hope and expect that that will happen before the House rises for the summer recess.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Is it appropriate for Mr Speaker to remain in his place when there are allegations against him, which he is trying to suppress, using taxpayers’ funds, by sending letters through Speaker’s Counsel?

Andrea Leadsom: I think it vital for all colleagues to join together in supporting the efforts being made by the House to stamp out all bullying and harassment wherever we see it, and to ensure that in future everyone will be treated with the respect and dignity that they deserve.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I heartily congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on securing this very important urgent question. She, like me, will find some of the issues that were raised by the BBC’s “Newsnight” programme depressingly familiar. It comes as little surprise to any of us who listened to the evidence that we secured on the harassment working group. It was only a matter of time before such issues would emerge, and it is quite surprising that it has been so short.

This endemic culture must be tackled, and I strongly support the call by the Leader of the House for an independent inquiry. Will she tell us a little about how it will be conducted? Does she agree that historical allegations must be considered, and does she support the view that we would be letting down victims past and present if we failed to respond to such allegations? Does she agree that this is all just part of the normalisation of bullying and harassment that continues to poison our politics, amplified by the archaic environment of grandeur and subservience in which we perform our roles as Members of Parliament?

Finally, will the Leader of the House ensure that all members of staff—whether they work for the House or for Members of Parliament—are covered by the new behaviour code, and have access to the new complaints procedure, as quickly as possible?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his part in the working group; he assiduously attended meetings and took a full part in its work, and I am grateful to him for his contribution. He asks how an independent inquiry will be conducted: my intention is to make the proposal to the House Commission, and it will then be a matter for the Commission to agree
whether to do that or not. The House Commission is made up of a number of Members from across the House, including one from the hon. Gentleman’s party. However, I would like to see the inquiry carried out by an independent individual who can hear from past and current members of staff of the House, so that person is free of any input from either employers or parliamentarians and people feel they can come forward in confidence.

I completely agree that it would be letting people down if we failed to deal with this, and it is vital that those who have past allegations who feel the time has passed for them to be dealt with seriously can achieve some closure by being able to come forward and be heard in that way. I also agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is demeaning to this House and to all of us if we fail to get a grip on this, and that is why this House has shown such commitment to setting up an independent complaints and grievance policy, which is the right way forward.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I welcome the Leader of the House’s statement. Does she agree that sometimes the accused can be victims, too, and that is why it is so important that we have an independent inquiry? Does she also agree that the House of Commons Commission would not be an independent judge or jury, and indeed would not be seen to be such, simply because of the very membership of that Commission, and that it does need to be an independent individual or group of individuals?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and we were very conscious during the working group evidence sessions that it is important to protect both complainants, who are at the heart of the independent complaints procedure, and the alleged perpetrators. It is important that justice is seen to be done and that all parties are properly supported. My hon. Friend is also right that an inquiry led by the House Commission could not be independent, which is why my recommendation to the House Commission will be that it should be an independently led inquiry into allegations of bullying.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): When the Leader of the House chooses, as she has done today, to focus on the thoroughness and decency of the process of dealing with these issues, she will get support from right across this House. She mentioned several times the involvement of trade union representatives, so will she join me in asserting that it is right that members of our staff and members of staff of this House are members of trade unions if they choose to be, and that their representatives ought to be involved at every stage of these processes?

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, unfortunately, under the current system House of Commons staff believe that if they make a complaint about bullying or harassment it will not be taken seriously, and, perhaps more insidiously, believe that it will be seriously detrimental to their future career? I welcome the fact that we are going to have an independent investigation into the allegations we heard on “Newsnight”. When will that start and when will it complete?

Andrea Leadsom: The House Commission meets next Monday; I will be making that recommendation there, and the investigation will start as soon as possible.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I think it is a matter of common accord that the House is exceptionally well served by the Clerk staff, so I hope it goes without saying that these complaints require to be investigated with rigour, in a comprehensive way and independently. Mr Speaker, when you and I first entered the House, it was almost entirely self-regulating. The position today is very different, but that change has been piecemeal. What is now required is a proper comprehensive reconsideration of the question of parliamentary privilege and self-regulation. I welcome the short independent inquiry that the Leader of the House seeks to establish, but once that is done she should apply her mind to revisiting the work of the Joint Committee set up in 1998 to look at the question of the extent and definition of parliamentary privilege.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman makes an interesting observation, and I will certainly look into it.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Does the Leader of the House agree that every individual complaint made against a Member reflects badly on each and every one of us? Given the “Newsnight” allegation that the policy was simply not up to scratch, and that it was certainly something that we decided among ourselves, does she agree that we need not only an independent investigation, but an external independent body to establish our future policy?

Andrea Leadsom: I hope I can reassure my hon. Friend that the independent grievance policy that we are in the process of establishing will ensure that the culture in this place changes to the benefit of all who work here. Many hon. Members are troubled by the allegations. It is, as ever, a small minority of people who behave badly, and he is right to point out that it demeans all of us when a few of us behave badly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Having been in the House quite a long time, I recall that, in the early days, the warnings to young women in the House were about not just a small group of Members of Parliament, but some senior Clerks who were known to be bullies. I was chair of the all-party parliamentary group on bullying for some years and have been fighting everyone’s corner, and I have never known a Speaker as strong on reform in that particular part of our lives. I urge the Leader of the House to get on with things quickly. We want justice to be done and to be seen to be done.
The inquiry should know that a tiny minority of Members have used this like a new form of McCarthyism by naming someone and putting them into purgatory. People on both sides of the House have been affected, but there has been no redress. Dreadful things have happened to them and their families, probably including things that we do not know about. There is a danger of a new kind of political McCarthyism, and we must stamp it out.

Andrea Leadsom: I remind the hon. Gentleman that the independent complaints procedure will be exactly that. It will be independent and confidential, so that complainants, who often do not want to come forward for fear of then having to deal with the person they are accusing, can come forward in confidence. The alleged perpetrator will also be able to have their side of the story heard in confidence. Natural justice rules will therefore apply to the entire process, but there will also be serious sanctions for wrongdoing. I genuinely believe that this work will change the culture in Parliament, take us to a new stage where people can come forward, and make people think twice about some of their attitudes.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I appreciate that there may be problems with definition, that many cases will not have been investigated and that details will often be sketchy at best at this stage, but can the Leader of the House give an indication of the scale of the problem? How many cases of abuse of House or Members’ staff have been brought to her attention in her recent dealings?

Andrea Leadsom: I do not think that I can give my hon. Friend an idea of the scale of the problem. Different cases have appeared in the media, and it is difficult to understand the enormity and range of the problem. Suffice it to say, we are determined to see change for the better across the House.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the emphasis that the Leader of the House has placed on due process and the principles of justice. Complainants must be taken seriously, but the person who has been complained about also has rights, and it is important that cases should be heard on the basis of evidence. Will she also say a word about the independent Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, who hears complaints about hon. Members and can then put them to the Standards Committee? That route needs to be somehow incorporated into the new process that she envisages.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right, and indeed that is part of the process. Very specifically, an independent complaint is heard in confidence; if there is a finding against the alleged perpetrator, in the case of a Member of Parliament being complained about, that would go to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, who would either carry out an appeal and look at the evidence again, or find against the Member, or find that there was no cause to answer. She will have expanded sanctions at a lower level, or indeed she will pass it on to the Committee on Standards so that it can consider the matter, including recommending suspension to the House, which could lead to the Recall of Members of Parliament Act 2015 being invoked.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Leader of the House agree that any member of staff who feels that he or she has been bullied must have an absolute guarantee that their career will not suffer in any way if they make a complaint? If they have that guarantee, does she agree that the reputation of Members of Parliament should not be sullied by accusations that they are bullies unless a complaint against them has been made?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend sums up the position very well. It is vital that complainants are protected so that they can come forward in confidence and not be further victimised, but it is also essential that people who are complained about have the opportunity to put their side of the story and receive proper justice.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the Leader of the House, her counterparts and you as well, Mr Speaker, on the response to these issues so far. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is a moment for each and every one of us to reflect on our behaviour, and that we should constantly reflect on our behaviour, because the critical issue is not what we judge or deem to be the appropriate behaviour, but how we make others feel? That is why the independent nature of the right hon. Lady’s proposals is critical, because this process has to be without political fear or favour, or political campaigns against opponents or anyone else, so that people can come forward.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is exactly right. The power dynamic—the idea that how we behave is not necessarily how we are seen to behave—is incredibly important. Certainly, in working group evidence, we took a lot of witness statements about exactly that, and it is vital that we take that into account.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Due process sometimes takes a very long time. May I ask the Leader of the House to ensure that due process should be as speedy as possible in the interests of everyone?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We are quite proud that we moved very quickly with the independent complaints procedure, but at the same time we are doing a thorough job, and that is our plan.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Every industrial tribunal has to be registered under the Ministry of Justice. In the interests of transparency, will the Leader of the House publish all industrial tribunal applications that have been registered against Members of Parliament, or indeed against the House of Commons?

Andrea Leadsom: I do not believe that that will be a matter for me, but I will certainly look into it.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): May I put on record my support for the work that the Leader of the House, you Mr Speaker, and all members of the working group have done since November on this issue?
Does the right hon. Lady agree that we need to take the politics out of this altogether? If people are to have confidence that we are truly listening, that victims will be believed and that we will have a proper process, it is time for professionals—not the press or political expediency—to lead that.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I completely agree with the hon. Lady. The independence is absolutely vital.

**Paul Farrelly** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I can assure you, Mr Speaker, that I have great respect for all staff I work with. I was the guinea pig in 2012 after a difficult phone-hacking report, for the original Respect policy. I was flayed by selective leaking six years ago, and it has happened again now. I ask the Leader of the House and hon. Members, before they jump to judgment after what was a very one-sided, selective BBC broadcast, to approach the cases that have been raised in a more balanced way, to consider the reasons why the original Respect policy was scrapped in the first place as not fit for purpose, and to give consideration to the disparity of support for MPs who are complained against, especially when complainants have the backing of the resourceful and very well-resourced First Division Association in particular? Finally, may I ask the House to consider why old, historical allegations like this are being selectively recycled now, and by whom, because whatever is at play this is not a game for reputations or families?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The advantage of an independent complaints procedure is that it will exist for people to be able to come forward with confidence and with confidentiality. That means that at long last they will have somewhere they can go to make their complaint without just going straight to the press, which, as the hon. Gentleman says, has caused some difficulties.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The working group report recommends training by the end of this Parliament. Clearly, that is inappropriate. Will the Leader of the House bring it forward to ensure that every Member and manager has face-to-face training within this year?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady is not quite right about that: the working group proposes that training is essential for all Members across the House in a wide variety of areas, and measures are being brought forward to encourage people to undertake training. We have said that in their induction new Members in the next Parliament will receive compulsory training in certain areas.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Will the Leader of the House clarify something: if a House of Commons staff member raises a complaint today, or in the next few days, under what policy or procedure would that complaint be dealt with?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Currently, members of House staff who are making allegations of bullying or inappropriate behaviour will come under the House Respect policy, which was established a few years back. What the working group is creating is an independent complaints procedure. The House staff were not going to be subject to, or able to take advantage of, the independent complaints procedure, and we now want to look at that again.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I have huge respect for the staff of this House—whether they work in our catering department or the Clerks department, my experiences of them have been excellent—but may I add my voice to those who are calling for absolute due process in this? We need to respect the complainant and the complained against; that is the only way to deal with allegations of this nature. Will the Leader of the House join me in issuing a word of caution to Members of this House about conducting these matters in the media, whether off the record or on it, not least because that might prejudice any process or give the impression that it is politicised or personalised in its approach?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The working group put the complainant at the heart of this procedure, and what was very clear from the evidence we took was that people will come forward only if they feel they will be treated in confidence and they will not then be plastered all over the front of the newspapers.

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): Bullying and harassment occur in all walks of life and in all professions. What is important is that the person is listened to and the matter is investigated independently, but I say strongly that we must also remember the golden thread that runs through our English law: someone is innocent until proven guilty.

**Andrea Leadsom:** Yes, and the laws of natural justice have certainly been applied to the new independent complaints procedure.

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): When I was a Unite rep in the NHS, I represented members on both sides of bullying and harassment cases. One thing that would have made my job as a workplace rep very difficult would have been having a two-tier system in operation. Will the Leader of the House assure us that she will move towards a single system, a robust policy and equal trade union recognition for everyone who works in this House?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I can certainly tell the hon. Lady that it was the working group’s ambition that all those who work here would have access to the independent complaints procedure. As I have said to other hon. Members, it is our intention to look at that again.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Even today, the vast majority of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students in school will at some point or other in their school career face horrific instances of bullying, which is why they are six times more likely than their straight counterparts to take their own lives. Many schools have said, “Oh, let’s build a tolerant school,” but to homosexuals that sometimes feels as though we are being tolerated—we are being put up with. Is the key word not “respect”—respect for one another, whatever our political views, whatever our gender, whatever religious views we have or whatever any part of our background? The only way we are going to be able to change that culture in here is if we make sure that every single one of us is fully and properly trained, not only the first time we come into this House, but every time we are returned by our voters.
Andrea Leadsom: I do agree with the hon. Gentleman that respect is key. We are determined to achieve in Parliament a workplace environment that is among the best in the world and that treats everybody with the respect and dignity that they deserve.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Mr Speaker, we have known each other since long before either of us was elected to this place and I think it is fair to say that we have had strong and heated disagreements about lots of issues over the years, so I certainly could not be described as a cheerleader by any means, but I do think that there has to be a fair and proper process in all this. It cannot be based on anonymous briefings to the press, it cannot be based on political disagreements, and it cannot be based on score-settling, either.

Andrea Leadsom: I say again that the whole purpose of an independent complaints and grievance policy is to ensure that there is justice for the complainant and for the person alleged to have carried out the wrongdoing.
a direct act by the Russian state against our country; or the Russian Government lost control of their potentially catastrophically damaging nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others.

This afternoon, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has summoned the Russian ambassador to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and asked him to explain which of the two possibilities it is and to account for how this Russian-produced nerve agent could have been deployed in Salisbury against Mr Skripal and his daughter. My right hon. Friend has stated to the ambassador that the Russian Federation must immediately provide full and complete disclosure of the Novichok programme to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and he has requested the Russian Government’s response by the end of tomorrow.

This action has happened against a backdrop of a well-established pattern of Russian state aggression. Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea was the first time since the second world war that one sovereign nation has forcibly taken territory from another in Europe. Russia has fomented conflict in the Donbass, repeatedly violated the national airspace of several European countries and mounted a sustained campaign of cyber-espionage and disinformation, which has included meddling in elections and hacking the Danish Ministry of Defence and the Bundestag, among many others.

During his recent state of the union address, President Putin showed video graphics of missile launches, flight trajectories and explosions, including the modelling of attacks on the United States with a series of warheads impacting in Florida. The extra-judicial killing of terrorists and dissidents outside Russia was given legal sanction by the Russian Parliament in 2006, and, of course, Russia used radiological substances in its barbaric assault on Mr Litvinenko. We saw promises to assist the investigation then, but they resulted in denial and obfuscation and the stifling of due process and the rule of law.

Following Mr Litvinenko’s death, we expelled Russian diplomats, suspended security co-operation, broke off bilateral plans on visas, froze the assets of the suspects and put them on international extradition lists, and those measures remain in place. Furthermore, our commitment to collective defence and security through NATO remains. We will never in the face of Russian behaviour. Indeed, our armed forces have a leading role in NATO’s enhanced forward presence, with British troops leading a multinational battlegroup in Estonia. We have led the way in securing tough sanctions against the Russian economy, and we have at all stages worked closely with our allies and will continue to do so. We must now stand ready to take much more extensive measures.

On Wednesday, we will consider in detail the response from the Russian state. Should there be no credible response, we will conclude that this action amounts to an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom, and I will come back to this House to set out the full range of measures that we will take in response.

This attempted murder using a weapons-grade nerve agent in a British town was not just a crime against the Skripals, but an indiscriminate and reckless act against the United Kingdom, putting the lives of innocent civilians at risk. W e will not tolerate such a brazen attempt to murder innocent civilians on our soil. I commend this statement to the House.

5.13 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of her statement on this deeply alarming attack, which raises very serious questions. The whole House condemns the suspected poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury and, of course, we wish them a return to good health. I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey a speedy recovery as well. No member of our police force and nobody on the streets of Britain should ever face such an attack—let alone one with chemical weapons.

I thank the Prime Minister for updating the House. The investigation into the shocking events in Salisbury must reach its conclusions. We need to see both the evidence and a full account from the Russian authorities in the light of the emerging evidence to which the Prime Minister referred. For now, can the Prime Minister clarify what level of threat it was believed that Mr Skripal faced at the time of the attack and what security protection, if any, was deemed necessary for him and his daughter?

This morning, the Conservative Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs said that he would be “surprised” if the Prime Minister “did not point the finger at the Kremlin”.

The hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) also accused the Russian Government of behaving “aggressively” and in “a corrupting way” in this country.

We need to continue seeking a robust dialogue with Russia on all the issues—both domestic and international—currently dividing our countries, rather than simply cutting off contact and letting the tensions and divisions get worse and, potentially, even more dangerous.

We are all familiar with the way in which huge fortunes, often acquired in the most dubious circumstances in Russia and sometimes connected with criminal elements, have ended up sheltering in London and trying to buy political influence in British party politics—“meddling in elections”, as the Prime Minister put it. There have been more than £800,000 of donations to the Conservative party from Russian oligarchs and their associates. If that is the evidence before the Government, they could be taking action to introduce new financial sanctions powers even before the investigation into Salisbury is complete. But instead they are currently resisting Labour’s amendments to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill that could introduce the so-called Magnitsky powers.

Will the Prime Minister agree today to back those amendments? More specifically—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There can be strongly held opinions and inflamed passions, but I appeal to colleagues, whose sincerity and integrity I do not doubt, to remember that we hear views. Other colleagues will be heard, but the right hon. Gentleman must be heard now.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

More specifically, when it comes to the Salisbury attack, what actions are the local police taking to identify fellow diners at the Zizzi restaurant and the Mill pub in Salisbury on the day in question and to ensure that they come forward and are checked? What extra resources are being provided to the local police force, which quite understandably has never had to deal with such an incident before?
We know that the national health service is under incredible pressures across the country, but what extra resources have been provided to the NHS hospitals in and around Salisbury, and what training has been given to NHS staff and GPs in identifying the symptoms of a nerve agent attack?

The events in Salisbury on 4 March have appalled the country and need thorough investigation. The local community and public services involved need reassurance and the necessary resources. The action that the Government take once the facts are clear needs to be both decisive and proportionate, and focused on reducing conflict and tensions, rather than increasing them.

I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the magnificent work of our public services responding to this attack: the NHS staff, the police and security services, the armed forces and the analysts at Porton Down. Let us do everything we can to ensure that this never ever happens again.

Jeremy Corbyn

The Prime Minister: I am sure that everybody in the whole House sends their best wishes to all those who have suffered as a result of this incident and wish for their recovery. In the case of Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey, I read a quote that I was not surprised by because I have heard it from so many police officers who have been in dangerous situations before: he said that he was merely doing his job. We are grateful to him and all our police officers and emergency services for doing that. We do not comment on the threats in relation to individual cases, but of course the police and others always look to ensure that we are taking these matters fully into account and taking them very seriously.

In relation to Russia, we have a very simple approach, which is, “Engage but beware.” This shows how right it is that this Government have been cautious in relation to its arrangements with Russia. In my Mansion House speech last November, I set out very clearly the concerns that we have about the activities of Russia. It is a matter that I have discussed with fellow leaders at the European Union Council. We must all be very well aware of the various ways in which Russia is affecting activity across the continent and elsewhere. There can be no question of business as usual with Russia.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the issue of party donations. I will say two things to him. First, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer said at the weekend, you should not tar everybody who lives in this country of Russian extraction with the same brush. Secondly, there are rules on party political donations, and I can assure him that my party and, I hope, all parties follow those rules.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about Magnitsky powers. I have been challenged previously on this question. We do already have some of the powers that are being proposed in relation to the Magnitsky law. However, we have already been talking with all parties about the amendment that has been put down, and we will work with others to ensure that we have the maximum possible consensus before the Report stage.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the question of police capabilities and resources. Not only are Wiltshire police involved in this, but they have support from neighbouring forces, as would normally happen when an incident takes place which requires that extra capability. But crucially, at a very early stage, it was decided that counter-terrorism police should take over the responsibility for this because the counter-terrorism police network has capabilities that are not available to regional forces, and they are indeed in charge in relation to this.

I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that Wiltshire County Council and Salisbury City Council are working with Public Health England, with the NHS locally and with the police to ensure that there is maximum information available to members of the public—the chief medical officer has herself reassured members of the public that the public health risk is low—and to ensure that the proper arrangements are being put in place to help the police to get on with their inquiries. That is important. The police are still working on investigating this, and we should ensure that they have the time and space to be able to conduct those investigations.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for rising to this occasion as she should? Many in this House would wish that the Leader of the Opposition had abandoned party politics and done just the same.

My right hon. Friend is quite right: if the response from the Russian ambassador is simply not credible, she is right to expect the House to back her in taking the most severe action as is required and commensurate. She is also right to remind the House, and the country, that this country—Russia—is now as close to being a rogue state as any. It occupies Crimea; it has helped to occupy eastern Ukraine; and it has created a hell on earth in Syria, and is even now overseeing worse action. This is a country locking up its members of the opposition. Frankly—we have learned this lesson before—if we appease a country like this, we can expect even worse.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his remarks. He is absolutely right. Nobody should be in any doubt about the various activities that the Russian state is involved in across the continent of Europe and elsewhere and the damage that that is doing in so many different places. He is absolutely right that that is why it is important that this Government—this country—stand up very clearly and not only call out actions by Russia but also ensure that we have a robust response to them.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for giving me an advance copy of her statement. I share her concerns about the recent attack on Salisbury. It is important that we all work together to get to the bottom of what has happened there. There can be no denying that this assassination attempt on Mr Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia is not only a step too far by those responsible; it also calls into question every aspect of our current and future relationship with Russia. This ruthless action not only put at risk the lives of our emergency services but threatened the safety of the wider public who were enjoying a Sunday afternoon in the cathedral city of Salisbury. Everyone has the right to live in the UK in security and safety, and any challenge to that right needs to be responded to in an appropriate manner. The police have so far identified more than 200 witnesses and 240 pieces of evidence in the attempted killing.
All our thoughts are with Nick Bailey and his family, and we wish him a speedy recovery. We commend the emergency services for putting their lives on the line in order to protect all of us. However, there are legitimate concerns around the delay in time between the events on Sunday 4 March and yesterday, when the chief medical officer advised the public who had been at the restaurant and at the pub to wash their clothing and personal items. Can the Prime Minister give reassurances today to those members of the public who have real concerns that they might have been exposed to the effects of the nerve agent used?

I welcome the actions detailed in the Prime Minister’s statement. May I ask her when she intends to return to the House to update us on the measures that we can all take? Firm and strong action must be taken to send a clear message to the Kremlin that we will not accept Russian interference in our democracy or in our way of life. I hope that she will take the time to raise this matter with colleagues across the EU, our closest allies, to help to give us a strong voice when we all say, as one, that this kind of international outrage must never be seen again on our streets.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the tone that he has adopted in his response to the statement. This is indeed a matter that should concern us all; it is a matter of national interest. An attack has taken place, and we must respond to it appropriately, as he has said. He asked about the chief medical officer’s most recent advice to those who had been in the Zizzi restaurant or in the pub. The answer to that is that, over the course of time last week, as work was being done on this issue, more information became available about the nature of the agent that had been used. That led to that precondition advice being given yesterday. The right hon. Gentleman also asked when I would be returning to the House. As I said in my statement, we will consider in detail the response from the Russian state on Wednesday, and I will return to the House at the earliest possible opportunity.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): This, if not an act of war, was certainly a warlike act by the Russian Federation, and it is not the first that we have seen. Some in this House have stayed silent or decided to join the information warfare that that state is conducting against us and our allies, but we have seen it invade countries in the east, attack allies and attempt to kill Prime Ministers. Even now, it is backing the murderous Assad regime which thinks nothing of gassing its own people, yet the right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition stays silent. Does my right hon. Friend agree that now is the time for us to call on our allies—the European Union, which has worked with us so well on sanctions, NATO and particularly the United States—and ask what they will do to assist us in this moment when we are in need?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we should be giving a robust response from the whole of this House to this incident—this act that has taken place. There have already been a number of engagements with our allies on this particular matter, and we will continue to talk to them to ensure that they are aware of what has happened on British soil and that we can talk with them about the response that we will be giving.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Does the Prime Minister agree that one of the most effective ways of punishing Russia for these appalling activities would be to seize the private property assets of members of the Putin regime and its associates? As a first step, could she arrange to publish a list of who they are and what they own?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we are aware of the need in the United Kingdom to ensure that our financial system cannot be used for illicit money flows, that appropriate action is taken by law enforcement and other bodies to ensure that we identify such flows and that we make the appropriate response to them. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, we are already putting in place a number of measures to improve the information that is available in a transparent way in relation to the holding of certain assets here by those from overseas, and that is something we will continue to work on.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I entirely agree with the Prime Minister’s approach to this murderous attack. She will be aware, as she has stated, that it is part of a pattern of behaviour by which a state uses covert means in breach of both international law and the rule of law to attack with impunity whoever it wishes. In those circumstances, does she agree that we face a very particular challenge that is not likely to go away any time soon? In that context, in trying to inform the public of the risks and of the appropriate way of responding for a parliamentary democracy, can I encourage her to make use of the Intelligence and Security Committee, which chose to carry out an inquiry into Russia’s threat last autumn, so that we can take that forward and provide as much information as we can publicly about the nature of the threat and the best means of responding to it?

The Prime Minister: It was very good that the ISC had already announced that it would be considering issues around Russian activity against the UK that requires investigation. I look forward to the work that my right hon. and learned Friend’s Committee will be doing on that, and the Government will work with the ISC to share relevant information that is within its remit.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement. It is hard to see any alternative to her grave conclusion that either this was a direct act by the Russian state against our country or the Russian Government have lost control of a dangerous nerve agent. In that context, I hope the whole House will be able to come together behind a firm response from the Government in the interests of our national security and public safety. Can I therefore ask her whether the National Security Council has asked for a review of the 14 other cases that I wrote to the Home Secretary about to see whether any of those should be investigated? Can I also press her on what further action she has taken in preparation for potential UN Security Council resolutions that should be drafted in order to get the widest possible international support?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right about the need for a clear response from the whole House, and everybody in the House should be in no doubt of the nature of what has happened and that we should respond robustly to it. I understand that my
right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has responded to her letter in relation to those 14 other cases. I think the focus at the moment should be on ensuring that resources are put into this criminal investigation, so that the police are able to do their work with the maximum time and space.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Prime Minister recall that when Edward Heath expelled more than 100 Russian so-called diplomats in the early 1970s, it gave a blow to Russian intelligence operations against this country from which it did not recover until the end of the cold war? Does she also recall that when it was clear that a member of the Libyan embassy staff—which one was unknown—had killed WPC Yvonne Fletcher, a wholesale expulsion of staff occurred then? As it would be impossible for an operation to have been mounted by the Russian state without someone in the London Russian embassy knowing about it, does she therefore conclude that similar measures may well be necessary?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend. As I said in my statement, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has called the Russian ambassador into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office today and presented the two possibilities of the origin of this action to him. We wait for the Russian state’s response. I am very clear that, should that response not be credible, we will conclude that this action is an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom, and as I said earlier, I will come back to the House and set out the full range of measures that we will take in response.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Naturally, there is the most intense interest in this extraordinarily grave matter, and I am keen to accommodate colleagues. May I ask colleagues to help me to help each of them by confining themselves to pithy questions?

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Prime Minister agree that, in the face of yet further aggression from the Russian mafia state, the policy of the Leader of the Opposition of engaging in robust dialogue will only encourage Putin to engage in further acts of state-sponsored terror? Does she agree that in the national interest, and regardless of the cost to this country, the only effective answer is to take robust action against those who are using the UK as a battleground in which to carry out their own acts of assassination?

The Prime Minister: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. We need to ensure that we do in fact respond robustly to this matter, but we need to do so given careful consideration to the assessments that have been made and the information that is available to us, and that is exactly what the Government are doing. Nobody in this House should be in any doubt that there can be no suggestion of business as usual in relation to our interaction with Russia.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The whole country will welcome the precise and clear statement that the Prime Minister has delivered to the House this afternoon. In particular, she has set out precisely what she will do in terms of laying out the evidence for the international community and the United Nations about the act that has been perpetrated on British soil. May I also welcome the comments she made about the so-called Magnitsky amendment? Many of us on both sides of the House of Commons believe that this could make a big contribution, and I hope that she will continue to consider following America, Canada and three European countries in introducing such an amendment.

The Prime Minister: I recognise that my right hon. Friend is supporting the amendment and has been working on this issue. I say to him, as I have previously, that we want to ensure that we get the maximum possible consensus across the House on this particular issue. [Interruption.] We will talk to the parties involved to ensure that the approach taken is one that— [Interruption.] The shadow Foreign Secretary keeps saying, “There is an amendment down.” There is an amendment down, and discussions are taking place with parties about the impact of the amendment as currently drafted. We will ensure that any action taken will be action that we can be sure will work.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): May I commend the Prime Minister for today making the sort of resolute and realistic statement about the Kremlin that many of us have been looking for in this House for some time? Will she invite the heroic and brave Bill Browder, who has done more than any other single individual to uncover the Kremlin’s methods, to give her a full briefing about what he knows of Putin’s cronies’ money-laundering exploits in London and the British political figures who have been corrupted by Kreml money? Will she also make sure that the whole of the Government machinery is now giving full co-operation to Robert Mueller’s inquiry in the United States, because of what he has already uncovered about what the Russians have been doing here?

The Prime Minister: We have already been clear, in relation to the Mueller inquiry, that we will of course respond to appropriate requests. I am told that the other individual to which the right hon. Gentleman referred has actually already met the Security Minister, and has therefore been able to brief him on what he knows.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Friends from especially Scandinavia, the Baltics and across eastern Europe have often told me how much they feel increasingly at risk from the rise in Russian aggression. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on how we will work with our allies in response to this incident?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am very conscious that those who are, particularly geographically, close to Russia on the European continent very much feel the immediacy of many of the activities that Russia gets involved in, particularly, for example, matters of propaganda use. I will certainly be speaking to a number of our allies. It is important that people recognise not only what has taken place here in the United Kingdom, but, if it is a Russian state activity, the implications it has for Russia’s activities elsewhere on the continent of Europe.
Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Can I also commend the Prime Minister for her remarks? The last time we had a clear, defined, state-sponsored act of terrorism was in 2006, and she has referred to that. Can she have conversations with her predecessor, Tony Blair, who was Prime Minister at that time, about some of the issues that arose subsequent to the actions we took, because it is clear that the Russians will retaliate and we will then be in a tit-for-tat process? They think we will back down. We have to say, resolutely and strongly, that we are not backing down. This is an act of terrorism and all Members of Parliament should stand together.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. When we take action, we must ensure that it is action that we will continue to follow through. As I said in my statement, many of the actions taken in response to the Litvinenko murder are actually still in place in relation to our relations with the Russian state. Nobody should be in any doubt, however, of the likelihood of an impact from the Russian state in attempting to suggest, as it did in that case, that the information we put out is incorrect. The inquiry, which followed significantly later, very firmly put the responsibility for Litvinenko’s murder at the door of the Russian state and, indeed, of President Putin.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): May I commend the Prime Minister for the robust tone of her statement, which is entirely appropriate? Does she accept that, while we may not be in a period of cold war with Russia, as we were in the 1980s, it could be said that, because of its actions, we are at least now entering a period of cool war? If that be so, would she be prepared, at the appropriate time, to look again at entering a period of cool war? If that be so, would she accept that, while we may not be in a period of cold war with Russia, as we were in the 1980s, it could be that the information we put out is incorrect. The inquiry, which followed significantly later, very firmly put the responsibility for Litvinenko’s murder at the door of the Russian state and, indeed, of President Putin.

The Prime Minister: As I have said previously, there is no question of business as usual with Russia. We must be very clear about the actions it has taken. This incident proves that the actions we have taken over the past decade have not been entirely justified. What we see is a Kremlin that seems to be intent on dismantling the international rules-based order, and we should stand up resolutely in defence of that international order.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The evidence that the Prime Minister has provided today makes it absolutely clear that the onus is on the Russian state to explain how this nerve agent entered our country. I thank her for her answer to my colleague, the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee. It is absolutely essential that we can, where possible, ensure that the public are aware of the Russian threat. Does she also agree that our inquiry should be able to understand the pressures on our intelligence and security services, and how best they are supported to do the job they have to do?

The Prime Minister: Of course, it is for the ISC itself to determine the breadth of the inquiries it undertakes within the remit that it has been set by this House and by Government. Extra resources are being put into the security and intelligence agencies because we have recognised the increasing challenges and threats that we need to address. That is why significant resources are going into the single intelligence account.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Given the grisly fate of so many of President Putin’s opponents, both at home and abroad, including even those with a high profile such as Boris Nemtsov, no one in this House, least of all the Leader of the Opposition, should have any doubt of the nature of the Government with whom we are dealing. Having said that, and while I support all the measures the Prime Minister will take against the Government of Russia if the situation turns out to be as we all anticipate, will she try, as far as is possible, to ensure that British society, in its widest sense, can continue to be open with the people of Russia so that the virus of truth and openness can do its work on that regime?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. We are talking about the dealings the UK Government and this country have with the Russian state. It is important that people in Russia understand the exact nature of the regime in government there at the moment.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I do not suppose there is a single Member who is surprised that President Putin would resort to violence, because he has done it so many times before: 334 killed in the Beslan massacre; 170 killed unnecessarily in the Moscow theatre siege; 299 killed on flight MH17, the aeroplane brought down by the Russians; countless journalists and countless people who stood up to him as political opponents in other countries around the world murdered by him; and, yes, Sergei Magnitsky. I hear what the Prime Minister says, but may I just ask—this is the 29th time I have asked this question—whether we can ensure that, at the end of this process, nobody involved in the murder of Sergei Magnitsky, or in the corruption that he unveiled, will be allowed into this country? For that matter, can we just stop Russia Today broadcasting its propaganda in this country?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has asked me the question about the Magnitsky issue on many occasions in this House, both when I was Home Secretary and subsequently. We already have a number of powers that enable us to take action against individuals to prevent them from coming into this country, but we are looking seriously at the amendments. As I said, we want to ensure we have maximum consensus on this issue. On further action the Government might take, I will return to the House at the earliest possible opportunity, once we have a response from the Russian state, to update the House on the further measures we will take.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): If one permanent member of the UN Security Council carries out a targeted assassination in the country of another, surely it is time for the UN Secretary-General to launch an immediate inquiry.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his suggestion. The United Nations is one of the bodies, along with other allies and other organisations such as NATO, we will be speaking to about the nature of the incident that has taken place here in the United Kingdom. We will certainly be raising this matter with the UN.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): While the investigations are ongoing, we are waiting for a response from the Russian Government. May I ask
the Prime Minister what her Government are doing to protect other people who might be targeted here in the UK?

The Prime Minister: We do not talk about the measures that are taken in relation to individuals. That is a matter for the police and for law enforcement generally, but I can assure the hon. Lady that it is being considered.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I think I have just seen—I am looking at the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) as I say this—the most shameful moment in the House of Commons in my time to date. It is clear that our sovereign United Kingdom has come under attack from another state. Does the Prime Minister agree that the character of conflict is changing, that we must be relentless in trying to keep pace with it and that nothing will stop those who are doing this work receiving the resources they need?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the character of the threats we face is changing. They are diversifying and we need to ensure that we are able to deal with them across the range of actions that need to be taken. Indeed, some will not always fall into what might conventionally be considered to be defence.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Prime Minister confirm that he bear the Russian people nothing but good will? It is President Putin who we have in our sights and we will not allow him to use this in the presidential elections to burnish his image as a strong man.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is the Russian state we are challenging in relation to this particular act that has taken place on UK soil, not the Russian people.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Is it not increasingly clear that we are engaged in hybrid warfare with Russia that includes disinformation, political interference, cyber-attacks and now very possibly this act of attempted murder? In considering how to respond, will my right hon. Friend also look at what additional help we might give to the people of Ukraine, who are doing this work receiving the resources they need?

The Prime Minister: As I have said in response to a number of other questions, we will be raising this with allies in a number of forms. As I said earlier, we will consider the response from the Russian state on Wednesday, and I will return at the earliest possible opportunity to the House to set out further measures.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in commending Wiltshire’s police and health services, who have done a superb job in responding to this difficult case, and in highlighting the level of dedication and public service that is evident not just in Wiltshire, but up and down the country in our emergency services?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in commending the valuable work that has been done by emergency services in Wiltshire. They are a fine example of the dedication and commitment of our public services and emergency services across the whole country.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I have absolutely no doubt that the only way to deal with Putin’s regime in Russia is robustly, decisively and together as a Parliament and a country. I also add my voice to those talking about the repression of the Russian people, not least in Chechnya, where Putin continues to back the brutal regime of Ramzan Kadyrov and his attacks on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. May I urge the Prime Minister to speak with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to look at reviewing RTODAY’s broadcasting licence and to speak to the House authorities about blocking its broadcasts in this building? Why should we be watching its propaganda in this Parliament?

The Prime Minister: As I said in response to a number of questions, we will look at the response from the Russian state but I will come back to the House at the earliest opportunity to look at the range of measures that could be necessary. In relation to the House authorities, as the hon. Gentleman will be aware, that would be a matter not for me, but for the House authorities.

Mr Speaker: I think that we have heard the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) loudly and clearly.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her powerful statement and on her leadership in this incredibly grave matter. Is Russia a fit and proper state to be hosting or engaging in international sporting fixtures in 2018?

The Prime Minister: As I said in response to Prime Minister’s questions last week, we will be considering the attendance at the particular event that is coming up in Russia—the World cup—of dignitaries and Ministers from the United Kingdom.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I say to the Prime Minister that there should be unity across the House on what I feel is the proportionate and sensible approach that she has taken to analysing what has been happening and to coming back to report to the House. I also say that there are certain circumstances, as...
she knows, where we take party political differences of opinion, but when our country is potentially under attack, that is just not appropriate.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the tone that he has adopted. He is absolutely right: this is a question of the national interest. It is a question of the interest of our country and what another state may have done on British soil to people living here in the United Kingdom. That matter should concern all of us and be above party politics.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I know, having served with my right hon. Friend in the Home Office, that she will do what is right to keep our country safe. Will she confirm that, if Her Majesty’s Government conclude that there was unlawful use of force by the Russian state, we possess a considerable range of offensive cyber-capabilities that we will not hesitate to deploy against that state, if it is necessary to keep our country safe?

The Prime Minister: We, of course, will look at responses across a number of areas of activity, should it be—as my right hon. Friend said and as I said in my statement—that we conclude that this action does amount to an unlawful use of force by the Russian state here in the UK.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is good that the Prime Minister has come here today to spell out what actions have already been taken and has promised to return again to inform us of what happens next. Will she also make sure that the lessons learned in the Salisbury community about this threat and how to prevent it in local communities is shared in an appropriate way with other communities across the country?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to say that I am sure lessons will be coming out of this for local communities, the NHS and the police as they look into this matter. We will ensure that those are available to all across the country.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): In considering Russia, we should never forget that, for all its geographical size, Russia’s economy is little more than half that of the UK. In those circumstances, does my right hon. Friend agree that British economic levers are far more potent than some might realise and that we should not hesitate, if the circumstances demand it, to pull them hard?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, we will be looking at the full range of measures once we have considered the response that comes from the Russian state. The United Kingdom has in fact been one of the leaders in ensuring that, within the European Union, sanctions against Russia are in place as a result of the action that they took in Crimea and Ukraine.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): This horrific attempted murder on British soil demands a strong and united response from this House. Can the Prime Minister confirm whether the nerve agent in question is banned under the chemical weapons convention and that Russia is a signatory to that convention?

The Prime Minister: Yes, it is illegal to use a nerve agent of this sort. I understand that it is one that is banned under the convention.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Would the Prime Minister agree that this attack probably involved a professional, Russian-trained operative in order for such an individually targeted assault to be carried out with what must have been a minute amount of something like sarin, VX, or tabun, which could so easily have had catastrophic, wide-scale, indiscriminate and deadly consequences?

The Prime Minister: I will not speculate about the nature of the individual or individuals who are responsible for this attack. That is of course a matter for the police investigation.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Now we have all agreed that Russia is a clear and present danger, will the Prime Minister agree that we have to be fully organised to meet that danger? If we walk out into London tonight, we see Russian mafia and Russian security people swaggering about our capital city—all over Europe we see them. What they do not like is sanctions that bite. Will she come back to this House on an early occasion with a firm list of new sanctions that we can take against Russia?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is asking me to refer to a particular measure. As I said in my statement and in answer to a number of questions, we will consider the response from the Russian state. Should there be no credible response, we will determine and conclude that the action amounts to unlawful use of force by the Russian state in the United Kingdom, and I will return with further measures.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend confirm that, despite the difficulties that the American presidency may have on these issues, we are fully engaged with the American Government and our allies on this very important matter?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give my right hon. Friend the confirmation that we have engaged with our allies and will continue to engage with them on this important issue.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for coming to the House with this very important, but sadly not surprising conclusion today. She is going to make a further statement on Wednesday, but can I ask her to say a bit more about the possible responses and to ensure, at a time when voices and forces are trying to erode confidence in open democratic societies, that those responses will place us firmly and foursquare behind the solidarity and security of the west?

The Prime Minister: I hope the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not set out today what the response will be. We obviously need to consider the response from the Russian state and then put together the appropriate further measures to ensure the robust response that I and other Members have called for. He can rest assured, however, as can other Members, that we see a Russia that is flouting the international rules-based order—we have been very clear about that—that we will...
stand up for democracy, the rule of law and the international rules-based order and the values that underpin it, and that we remain committed to the security and defence of Europe and to defending the values that underpin the west.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I understand that the nerve agent Novichok was developed by Russia specifically to avoid being covered by the chemical weapons treaty and to avoid detection by standard equipment. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that Novichok is a totally illegal substance under a treaty to which Russia is a signatory and that any knowledge of detection and treatment that we gain from this ghastly attack will be shared with authorities, including health authorities, in this country and with our allies abroad?

The Prime Minister: It is very clear that the use of such a nerve agent goes against the spirit of the chemical weapons treaty. As my hon. Friend would expect, we will be talking to the responsible chemical weapons body and raising this issue.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): In the light of her comments, which I commend, does the Prime Minister agree that there is no place for hon. Members on either side of the House appearing on Russia Today? It is a propaganda mouthpiece for the Russian state with which no democratic politician should engage, and they should think twice before doing so. We should not be engaging with and giving credibility to such a media outlet.

The Prime Minister: We should all be wary and careful in looking at media outlets that any Member chooses to appear on. As I said, the issue of Russia Today is of concern to Members across the House, and I will make a further statement in the House after we have had the Russian state response.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): In the early 1980s, the planning assumption was that the road to war with the Soviet Union would be preceded by six months of increasing tension, sabotage and assassination. What are the current assumptions?

The Prime Minister: There was a time when the threats posed by Russia and others were clear and limited in their type; today, we see a diversity of threats. The previous question referenced Russia’s use of propaganda, and we see it using a variety of means by which to attempt to interfere, intervene and affect countries in the west. We must be able to respond across the range of threats posed.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for her remarks about this growing crisis. I appreciate that she will not want to discuss individual circumstances, but can she reassure the House that not only former Russian and eastern European nationals who might have offended Mr Putin, but high-profile British figures and, indeed, British public buildings are being reviewed to determine their security status in the light of the recent situation?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, we do not comment on individual cases—the hon. Lady is absolutely right about that. On national security, we regularly monitor and update the actions taken to protect people and premises here in the UK based on the threat as we perceive it at the time.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): As someone who has campaigned for a Magnitsky law and who was a member of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Public Bill Committee, may I say that the Opposition amendments, though well intentioned, were flawed and can be improved on? I am extremely grateful for the co-operation of Ministers and hope that the discussions will be fruitful. Will my right hon. Friend reflect the need for our allies abroad to understand that this could easily have happened in a provincial town in France, Germany or any other country, and that we are looking for action as well as warm words of support?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, a supporter of the Magnitsky law, for highlighting his comments. He is absolutely right: it is imperative that if amendments are to be added to legislation, we need to ensure they are workable. We need to get the amendments right. On his point about our allies, he is absolutely right: we should point out to people that this could have happened anywhere, in any provincial town or city like Salisbury.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The level of resilience voiced by the Prime Minister today has been many years in coming, but it is hugely welcome—indeed, it would put our national security at significant risk if we were led by anyone who did not understand the gravity of the threat that Russia poses to this nation. She mentioned our NATO allies and that she will come forward with measures on Wednesday. Will she confirm that our NATO allies and the potential for a collective response is in her thinking?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He is absolutely right: it is imperative that in this country we recognise the nature of the threat and actions Russia has taken through a wide range of means. I am also clear that, as we consider what further actions need to be taken, we must ensure they are robust, clearly defend our values here in the UK and send a clear message to those who would seek to undermine them.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her robust stance against Russian aggression. She will be aware that the most effective sanctions are those taken multilaterally. The concern of some is that when we leave the EU, we will lose our seat at the table on the body that sets those sanctions. Will she therefore reassure us that a lot of effort will go into building up a new relationship to ensure continuity in our approach towards Russia?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) raised the issue of collective action. Obviously, as my hon. Friend says, the position in relation to the UK Government’s actions on sanctions will change when we leave the EU, and we are putting in place measures to ensure that the UK can act independently,
but I also made it clear in my Mansion House speech that we would want to work with our allies on such issues. As he and the hon. Gentleman have said, sanctions are more effective when undertaken collectively.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I commend the Prime Minister for the stance she has adopted today. When she returns to the House, will she take the opportunity to assuage the cross-party concerns on the Select Committee on Defence about the de-escalation of our presence in the high north, the reduction in maritime surveillance and patrols, and the cancellation of this year’s cold weather training? There is a need for investment in defence, and I hope she will take this opportunity to deliver it.

The Prime Minister: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we consider very carefully the actions we take, including the training exercises that our military forces undertake. As I indicated in my statement, I am pleased that our forces are leading part of NATO’s enhanced forward presence in Estonia. I visited those forces in Estonia last autumn, and I can say that it is not only valuable for our forces but hugely welcomed by the people of Estonia, who obviously are right against the border with Russia and feel the threat very particularly.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement, and I pay tribute to a group of individuals who have, I think, been unmentioned so far this afternoon: the armed forces personnel who attended with the professionalism and selfless devotion to duty that we expect of them.

What is the Prime Minister doing with our allies in NATO, the United Nations and, of course, the European Union to ensure the maintenance of the international rules-based system, which is under systemic threat from the Russian Federation?

The Prime Minister: I reiterate my hon. Friend’s comments about the armed forces. In fact, I did mention them in my statement, but let me again praise the work that they did, alongside our emergency services, in relation to this incident, as well as what they do for us day in, day out. I assure my hon. Friend that we will look very carefully at any further measures that we should be taking in response to the incident.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The Prime Minister should know that if by Wednesday she concludes that we are indeed embattled, she will find both unity and resolve across the House as we face down a common threat.

Twelve years ago, in the aftermath of a wave of al-Qaeda-inspired attacks, we transformed the capacity of Governments to co-ordinate and fight back against extremism. May I urge the Prime Minister, in respect of the measures that she will introduce on Wednesday, to think radically about how she will create Government capacity to co-ordinate our response to this new level of threat, including new safeguards against the abuse of social media, which we know is part of the Russians’ active measures playbook?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks, and for the tone in which he made them. He is right: after the attacks by al-Qaeda, it was very clear that the then Government were putting in place a whole new structure of response in terms of counter-terrorism. UK Governments have been consistently looking at hostile state activity for many years, but in our national security capability review, as we look at our ability to react to the threats that we now face, we will of course ensure that the structures within Government are such that it is possible to co-ordinate properly the actions that we need to take.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I welcome the statesmanlike tone of the Prime Minister’s comments. They were in stark contrast to those of the Leader of the Opposition, whose Soviet ramblings would have done no benefit to Russia Today. May I urge her to be uncompromising in signalling that British and European liberal democratic values are not negotiable, and that this Government will not allow this country to be a playground for Kremlin kleptocrats? Will she consider aggressive cultural sanctions to hit Mr Putin and his team where it hurts, and, in particular, will she consider boycotting sporting events?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said. I assure him that, as I have said to others, we will consider a range of activities—a range of responses—and I will update the House further at the earliest opportunity. Let me also confirm that we will continue to defend the democratic values that underpin us as a country, but wish to do so alongside our allies. It was remarked earlier that the international rules-based order is under threat from Russia. I have to say that it is also under threat from others, and it is important that we stand up and robustly defend it.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Three people are gravely ill in hospital following this horrific chain of events. I welcome the Prime Minister’s resolve that business cannot go on as usual. Will she take this opportunity to tighten up the loopholes in the system in respect of money laundering, so that the “From Russia With Cash” situation that has occurred all too often does not turn into “From Russia With Blood”?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady will know, the Government recently took extra powers to enable us to deal with criminal finances through the Criminal Finances Act 2017, and I think it important that we did that. We are well aware that the very attractiveness of normal financial activity here in London can mean that there are those who see an opportunity for illicit flows of money, and we will take every possible action against them.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the strength of the Prime Minister’s statement. I am sure that she, like me, will be concerned by the parallels with a previous time when autocratic leaders decided to challenge the international rules-based system to prove that might would be right. Can she reassure me that she will work with allies to make it very clear to Mr Putin that, like them, he could easily go down the path to disaster and defeat?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly be working with allies to make very clear our defence of the international rules-based order, and that those who attack it will not win.
Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Today the focus has inevitably been on the Russians who are crooks and cronies of Putin. There are many decent Russians who have bravely spoken out against the regime, but those whom I have met over the years, both here and in Russia, sometimes feel very alone. Can we do more than just send a signal that we are absolutely appalled by what Putin has done? We need to send a signal of solidarity with those who are trying to resist his regime.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady speaks well about this matter. There are those who have bravely spoken out. We should be very clear that we support them in doing so. We want to ensure that they are able and free to do so, and able to feel confident about doing so, without fearing action that might be taken against them as a result.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I, too, commend my right hon. Friend for the statesmanlike way in which she is handling this appalling case. If it is indeed proved that it was state-sponsored, we must ensure that the response is not just from the United Kingdom, but from NATO and all our European allies! Together we stand, and we are a force to be reckoned with.

The Prime Minister: We have already been talking to allies about the nature of the act that has taken place, and we will continue to do so. We will encourage our allies to recognise the despicable nature of what has happened in the United Kingdom.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The main security challenges are state-sponsored terrorism, Daesh-sponsored terrorism and threats to cyber-security. Should not the UK defence portfolio be redesigned to meet those challenges, rather than concentrating on a new generation of nuclear weapons?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman refers to a number of threats. We ensure that we have the capabilities to address the terrorist threat and the threat of hostile state activity through a variety of actions that the Government take. As I said earlier, not every response sits within what would conventionally be called defence. The work of the security and intelligence agencies and the work of the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism, which sits in the Home Office, are also involved. That is why our national security capability review is important in bringing together all parts of our response and ensuring that we have the capabilities we need.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The Prime Minister is clearly right to suggest that, from hacking infrastructure to spreading disinformation, Russia has been waging a cyber-war against the west for a number of years. As Home Secretary, she took the Bill that became the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 through the House with cross-party support. Can she now reassure the House that if more such powers are needed, she will not hesitate to ask for them?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to confirm that. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is already considering what further counter-terrorism powers may be needed.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Since my election I have spent a great deal of time campaigning for more protections for emergency services workers, and it is particularly disappointing that we are now having to reflect on how we can keep them safe from nerve agents. I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement, which made it clear that what was particularly reckless about this attack was the decision to use a nerve agent that would inevitably put at risk members of the public, as well as our emergency services and NHS workers who would have to respond. I welcome the news that she will put that at the forefront of the meeting that she is due to have this week, and will put the seriousness of the threat presented to police and NHS workers in particular at the forefront of the robust measures that are now needed.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has raised a very important point about our emergency services. We have already, in recent years, had a further look at the framework within which they operate and the sort of incidents to which they might need to respond, but we will of course continue to keep this under review.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): The attacks on Mr Litvinenko and Colonel Skripal had one thing in common: they were designed not just to kill, but to kill in a particularly terrifying and horrible way. With that dreadful threat in mind, will the Prime Minister ensure that our national defence is in sufficient shape to meet that Russian threat in terms of composition, location and funding?

The Prime Minister: Yes. As I have said in response to a number of questions, this is a matter of the capabilities that we have across our national security and defence. It is important that we have been conducting, and are continuing to conduct, a number of reviews that go straight to the heart of this matter, to ensure that we have the capabilities that we need across the board.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I commend the Prime Minister for their statement and the robustness with which they addressed the House. Will they assure the House that in the coming days, when they discuss next actions with our allies, they will act robustly with some of our more recalcitrant NATO allies—notably Spain—who give port to the Russian fleet to allow them to refuel? Enough is enough.

The Prime Minister: As I have said, I will of course be raising this issue with allies, and we will be talking with them about the nature of the response that we feel is appropriate to such an action having taken place.
Northern Ireland Finances

6.20 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on Northern Ireland finances.

Last week, I made a written statement in which I explained that the pressures on public services meant that it was imperative for the Government to take steps to provide clarity to enable planning in Northern Ireland for 2018-19. With great reluctance and in spite of my strong preference for a new Executive to set a budget, I set out in that statement the resource and capital allocations that I considered to be the most balanced and appropriate settlement for Northern Ireland Departments. I did this following intensive engagement with the main Northern Ireland parties. In the continued absence of an Executive, I have an obligation to take these and any other measures that are necessary to keep Northern Ireland functioning, but I will only take such measures where they are essential, limited in nature and part of a clear and consistent approach by the Government.

This approach is based on a number of principles. First, we remain steadfast in our commitment to the Belfast agreement; all that we do will be with the purpose of protecting and fulfilling the agreement. But, secondly, we will take those decisions that are necessary to provide good governance and political stability for Northern Ireland, consistent always with restoring the Executive and local decision making at the earliest possible opportunity. Thirdly, we will continue to implement our obligations under the agreement and its successors where possible, always working for the good of the community as a whole. Finally, we will continue to work with all the Northern Ireland parties—and with the Irish Government as appropriate—to remove the barriers to restoring the Executive and a fully functioning Assembly.

The principles at the core of the agreement, and the political institutions that it establishes, continue to have our full and unreserved support. We will uphold the principle of consent, consistent with this Government’s support for Northern Ireland’s place within the Union and while maintaining the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom. We believe in devolution and the imperative for local decision making by local politicians. We support power sharing on a cross-community basis, based on mutual respect and recognition. We will continue to support and facilitate north-south co-operation, including as we leave the EU, while always preserving the economic integrity of the United Kingdom. We will continue to work closely with the Irish Government in full accordance with the three-stranded approach. And we will continue to act fairly and govern in the interests of all parts of the community in Northern Ireland.

The necessary steps that I have taken and will continue to take are consistent with all these commitments. In addition to the steps I set out last week, there are several associated measures required to further secure public finances, which I will be taking forward. As well as cutting costs, securing efficiencies and beginning to take the steps to transform public services, it is right to look at how income can be increased to protect the public services on which the people of Northern Ireland depend. So I will introduce legislation to set a regional rate, which will increase domestic rates by 3% above inflation.

This will make an important contribution to sustainable finances in the long run, with the additional funding addressing urgent pressures in health and education.

I intend to act to extend the cost-capping of the current renewable heat incentive scheme in Northern Ireland, which the Assembly had put in place over a year ago. It would not be acceptable to put finances at risk by simply allowing that cap to lapse. I therefore propose to extend it for a further year from 1 April, the minimal possible step to protect the public purse. I will also confirm the final spending totals for the Northern Ireland Departments for the 2017-18 financial year in legislation, to set supplementary estimates.

I believe that the time is right to address the ongoing public concern about MLA pay in the absence of a functioning Assembly. I thank Trevor Reaney, who was instructed by my predecessor to produce an independent view and recommended a 27.5% reduction to MLA pay. I will seek to introduce legislation to take a power to vary MLA pay. Further to that, I am minded to reduce pay in line with the Reaney review recommendation, but I would welcome full and final representations from the Northern Ireland parties before I make a final decision.

These measures—which I take reluctantly, but which are necessary in the absence of a functioning Executive and Assembly—will deliver the stability and the decisions to enable forward planning for the financial year ahead. But I am clear that they cannot provide the local input and fundamental decisions that are needed to secure a more sustainable future for Northern Ireland. My powers as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland are limited. The scope of this House to pass legislation on the devolved issues that matter for Northern Ireland is limited. This rightly reflects the devolution settlement that is in place and to which this Government are committed. But in the continuing absence of an Executive, there are fundamental decisions in Northern Ireland that cannot be taken, scrutinised and implemented as they should be.

That has been the situation for 14 months already, and in the continued absence of an Executive, it would be irresponsible for us not to consider how we might provide for different arrangements until such time as the devolved institutions are back up and running. Alongside this, I continue to keep under review my statutory obligation to call an Assembly election. I would welcome the views and proposals of the Northern Ireland parties and others on how such arrangements—providing for local decision making and scrutiny on a cross-community basis—might be achieved in the continued absence of an Executive and how any such arrangements might work alongside the other institutions of the agreement.

Let me be clear that this in no way affects my commitment to the Belfast agreement, or my commitment to work to remove the barriers to the restoration of devolution. As the 20th anniversary of the Belfast agreement approaches, I am clearer than ever that Northern Ireland needs strong political leadership from a locally elected and accountable devolved Government, and that remains my firm goal. I commend this statement to the House.

6.27 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): May I begin by wishing the Secretary of State a very happy birthday for today? I thank her for advance sight of her statement. Of course, we saw most of it last week when the
Government effectively published the budget for Northern Ireland in a written statement that came out at 5 o’clock on a Thursday evening, and I have to say that I think that is an unsatisfactory state of affairs; it is a bit discourteous to this House and, more importantly, the people of Northern Ireland to announce what is a £10.5 billion budget affecting key services for 1.8 million citizens in such a manner, with no opportunity for this House to question, challenge or, certainly, to amend those allocations, and in the absence of any accountable devolved Government in Northern Ireland. I am sure the Secretary of State would not think that was a suitable way to set a budget for her constituents in Staffordshire or mine in Pontypridd, and I hope she will explain to the House why the Government felt they needed to do it in that fashion.

Dare I suggest, Mr Speaker, that the real reason for this slightly stealthy announcement is that the Government are a bit embarrassed that just days before the Conservative party is going to vote through the latest rounds of cuts this slightly stealthy announcement is that the Government explain to the House why the Government felt they needed to do it in that fashion.

Turning to the substance of the budget, the Secretary of State said last week and repeated a moment ago that, in the absence of an Assembly and with decisions being taken by wholly unaccountable permanent secretaries, some fundamental decisions cannot be addressed. We agree, but it seems to me that some pretty fundamental decisions were taken last week by the Secretary of State, and I wonder whether she might answer some questions about them today.

First, on the decision to put up taxes in Northern Ireland through the regional rate, can the Secretary of State confirm whether that was discussed in detail and agreed with any or all of the parties in Northern Ireland? Secondly, in respect of the decision to significantly increase the budgets for some individual Departments, can she explain to the House the reasons for an increase for the Department of Justice of £36 million, or 70%, on last year, an increase for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs of £40 million, or 110%, on last year’s budget, or the increase for the Department for Communities of £38 million, or 30%, on last year? I am sure that there are good reasons for all those increases and for the significant cuts that are made to some of the administrative Departments elsewhere, but the House and the people of Northern Ireland deserve some explanation why the decisions were made and by whom.

As I said, I welcome the extra resources for Northern Ireland, including the extra £80 million for health and education and the extra £100 million to transform the health service in line with the Bengoa report, but will the Secretary of State spell out how that £80 million on health and education will be divided? Who will make the decision about the appropriate allocation? Is that something that the DUP co-ordination committee will be discussing with the Conservative Government, or has it already been discussed?

The Secretary of State talks about big health reforms, and she will be aware that some of the reforms mentioned in Bengoa and other health plans related to hospital closures and other changes to the configuration of health services. Does she imagine that such big decisions could be taken by civil servants? If not, what exactly is the £100 million to be spent on?

The gravity of the issues at hand and the scale of the decisions being taken merely serve to underline the grave crisis that we face in Northern Ireland 14 months after the Executive collapsed and power sharing ended. I welcome the Secretary of State reiterating her commitment to the Belfast agreement and the principles of consent and power sharing that underpin it, especially in the light of recent attempts by some to undermine the agreement. However, we need more than more tireless activity; we need to see some success in the forthcoming negotiations if we are to get to next month’s 20th anniversary with a real sense of optimism about the future of the agreement and of power sharing.

The Secretary of State was at pains to point out that she does not anticipate any failure in the negotiations, but the House and the country will have been struck by the acknowledgement that she thinks that she may need to consider alternative means of keeping the agreement and political accountability alive in the absence of an Executive. That raises important questions about feasibility, given that some parties will not want to take part in a shadow or other form of Assembly, and about the form of any alternative. It also raises a significant risk, of which I hope she will take particular note. Moving to an alternative form of Assembly would take pressure off the parties to come to an agreement that allows them to re-engage in meaningful power sharing. Does she acknowledge that risk in any shift away from the agreement?

Finally, I urge the Secretary of State to ensure that this is the last time we push through a budget using an unsatisfactory process and the last time that a budget is set by this House and not Stormont, where it ought to be set.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words about my birthday. I was not expecting to spend it making a budget statement, but there we go. I join him by saying that I hope that this is the last time that I have to stand at the Dispatch Box having taken such action, because we all agree that such decisions should be taken by locally elected politicians. The people who elected their politicians in Northern Ireland want them to take such decisions. I genuinely believe that those politicians want to take those decisions. There are, as he knows and as we have discussed previously, some issues on which the parties cannot agree, but I believe that we can get to a point at which a devolved Government can get up and running. That is what I am determined to achieve. Everything that I have done and set out today is in line with that aim. I want to see a devolved Government back in Stormont. The decisions that have been taken, while difficult, are those that needed to be taken for the public services, but I have taken them in the light of the fact that I do not want to undermine the constitutional arrangements and devolution settlement in Northern Ireland.

As for timing, the hon. Gentleman will recall that I committed to lay a budget by last week when I appeared in front of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee the week before last. That is why it was important to get the...
written statement out last week, and I am here at the earliest opportunity to explain things to the House and to take questions from right hon. and hon. Members. However, it is important to put it on the record that I did not publish the statement until I had had the chance to show it to all the main parties represented at Stormont and until they had had the opportunity to see the allocations. My fervent hope is that they will actually deliver the budget, which is why it is important that they were all consulted on the work that had been done.

I pay tribute to my officials and the civil servants of the Northern Ireland civil service. They have worked incredibly hard and selflessly to help to deliver the budget in a way that is uncomfortable for many. They want political direction from politicians, and it is difficult for them to do without it. They have gone above and beyond anything that we would expect of civil servants.

As for the decisions on the allocations, I looked at the key Departments. The hon. Gentleman asks about Justice, and I wanted to ensure that there was money to protect the policing budget, which he will recognise is very important. He asked about the £100 million from the confidence and supply arrangement for health transformation. That was money that the Government recognised and agreed needed to be spent in Northern Ireland because of its unique circumstances. I actually visited the hospital in Derry/Londonderry only last Monday and met consultants and managers, and it was clear to me that health transformation is a priority and that we need to ensure that the money is spent. I have taken legal advice to ensure that the money goes towards the priorities on which it is designed to be spent.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the alternative approaches, and he will know that many have suggested ways to arrange some form of functioning Assembly or scrutiny at Stormont. I am considering all the suggestions, a number of which have been made by the parties, and I would welcome further suggestions. I am taking legal advice on them all, because I do not want to do anything that undermines what we have achieved in the 20 years since the Belfast agreement. However, if there is a way of getting ourselves back on the road to a functioning devolved Government in Stormont, with scrutiny being applied by locally elected politicians, we should endeavour to try to find that route.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is the second of four ministerial statements to the House today. Notwithstanding its immense importance, and in the interests of accommodating subsequent business, I appeal to colleagues not to preface their questions with mini-speeches, but simply to ask a pithy question.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Nevertheless, Mr Speaker, I hope that you will allow me to add my best wishes to the Secretary of State on her birthday. I welcome the statement, particularly the bit in which she invites comments about how we might close the democratic deficit in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has many helpful suggestions, and we will certainly be sending them to her.

I draw my right hon. Friend’s attention to the written ministerial statement made on Thursday and the bit in which she says: “Permanent Secretaries cannot... take the full range of decisions that would be available to Ministers”—[Official Report, 8 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 20WS].

which is, of course, perfectly correct. She goes on to say that Ministers will be helpful in offering guidance. May I press her on exactly what form that guidance will take? She has set out departmental expenditure limits, but there is little granularity—certainly in the public domain—about what actually constitutes those DELs.

Karen Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, for his good wishes, for his question and for the Committee’s work in looking at devolution in Northern Ireland. I was pleased to give evidence to the inquiry, and I know that the Committee has visited several institutions and other places in Northern Ireland to consider what might be done. I look forward to the Committee’s recommendations.

In the absence of ministerial direction from Stormont, my hon. Friend is right that there is concern about the work that civil servants can do. We have worked closely with them, ensuring that legal advice is received at all points, so that they have the support they need to take decisions based on those that were previously taken by the Executive or that the Executive had indicated would have been taken. I have written to the permanent secretaries to set out my view and to provide guidance on how any money, such as the health transformation money, should be spent in line with the Bengoa recommendations.

Deirdre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for early sight of her statement, and I join the House in wishing her a very happy birthday. I will begin by making absolutely clear my view that while money needs to be allocated for the continued funding of public services in Northern Ireland, those matters should more properly be addressed by locally elected representatives. The decision to increase rates, for example, is a policy decision that reverses a key Stormont policy.

I am sure that none of us wants to be here again, but here we are, in order that the behind-the-scenes machinery of government that keeps the lights on and keeps people’s wages being paid can continue. We must at all times, however, keep in mind the fact that the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland is the principal aim. I was pleased that the Secretary of State continued to welcome the views and proposals of the Northern Irish parties and others on how local decision making and scrutiny on a cross-community basis might be achieved. Would she tell us a little bit more about how those views and proposals might be canvassed more transparently and shared with Northern Irish citizens?

With regard to confidence and supply agreement money, while of course no one ever begrudges extra money spent on health or education, the sum of more than £400 million is part of the £1 billion that the Democratic Unionist party extracted from the Conservatives to prop up the Government. In view of the considerable concerns about the deal and, indeed, recent concerns about the transparency of the political donations process in Northern Ireland, when can we expect further details about what the extra money will be spent on? Will the Secretary of State explain the destination of the money before the House separately from the allocation of funds required to continue funding public services? It is...
worrying that we appear to be stepping into a zone where money is allocated without close ministerial direction, and we have not yet seen any criteria for how that money will be spent. Will the Secretary of State commit to providing much greater transparency on the spending of the DUP deal money and lay the full details before the House?

Karen Bradley: Again, I thank the hon. Lady—I feel that I may be thanking everyone for their good wishes—for her kindness. She asked about alternative approaches. I invite any parties with suggestions about how this could function and how we might have some form of Assembly functioning with scrutiny in Stormont, but I will have to take legal advice on everything that is proposed. If a suggestion gathers cross-party support, we would want to talk about that with others so we ensured that we could deliver something that everyone was confident would put us back on the route to devolution, not away from it. That is my key priority.

The hon. Lady also asked about the money for the confidence and supply arrangement. She will know that the agreement is on the internet, and is available for everyone to see and download. She should also recognise that these are important changes, particularly to infrastructure. The York Street interchange, for example, is something that anyone in Belfast will know is crying out for investment and change. That is why the Government want to make sure that money is spent on the things on which it needs to be spent, including health transformation, in line with the Bengoa recommendations.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend think that the allocations in the budget largely suggested by the Northern Irish civil service, which is pretty canny, would be very different if the same civil service was advising a Northern Irish Executive, which is obviously not working at the moment?

Karen Bradley: Clearly, my hon. and gallant Friend is right that those are conversations that the Northern Ireland civil service has had with the parties as well as with the UK Government. It has been incredibly professional in ensuring that it looks at both the decisions made by the Executive before they collapsed and their programme for government. It reflects the priorities of the UK Government in ensuring that health, education and policing are protected.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May I join hon. Members in wishing the Secretary of State every best wish on this momentous occasion? May I thank her for early sight of the statement and for the Government’s clear support in that statement once again for Northern Ireland’s place within the United Kingdom? That is very welcome.

I welcome the budget statement and the £410 million extra for Northern Ireland as a result of the confidence and supply agreement. It will be spent on infrastructure, health and education, and will go to deprived communities, to mental health, to east and west, urban and rural, nationalist and Unionist—everyone benefits. That is a good news story for Northern Ireland, and it has been welcomed across Northern Ireland.

May I also welcome the fact that the Secretary of State said in the statement that she would take a series of decisions—the Government were beginning to take those decisions—for the good government of Northern Ireland? That is long overdue, and I welcome the series of measures that she has announced. I warmly welcome her willingness to look at arrangements that provide for local decision making and scrutiny on a cross-community basis in the meantime. She can be assured of our full support and engagement in that process. We want devolution up and running—she knows that we would form the Executive tomorrow on the basis of the agreed programme for government with Sinn Féin, and we welcome all efforts to return proper decision making to Northern Ireland.

Karen Bradley: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his good wishes and for his comments. I thank the DUP for the role that it played, along with all the other parties, in working with the Government to deliver the budget and ensure that we were able to reflect the priorities of the parties of Northern Ireland.

The right hon. Gentleman is right that the confidence and supply arrangement money that we have released will absolutely be spent on a cross-community basis, for all communities, and for all parts of Northern Ireland, dealing with issues that have perhaps been underfunded in the past or, particularly in the case of infrastructure arrangements, very much need funding today. I thank him for his kind words.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I welcome the review by the Secretary of State of pay for Members of the Legislative Assembly. On a separate matter, does she think it is unsustainable for hon. Members who do not take their seats in Parliament to continue to receive representative money for political campaigning?

Karen Bradley: Clearly, the matter to which my hon. Friend refers is a matter for the House, and I know that there are hon. Members who are well versed in the procedures needed for such matters. The issue of MLA pay is something I need to look at as a result of the review by Trevor Reaney, and I would welcome representations from all about that matter.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I, too, thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement? The measures that she has brought to the House are to be supported. It is sad but inevitable that it should have to happen this way, but all that we are doing is treating the symptoms, not the underlying disease.

The Secretary of State will have seen the recent comments of the chairperson of the Policing Board about the need for proper accountability of policing in Northern Ireland. The fact that the Police Service of Northern Ireland spends £125,000 a day on overtime demonstrates that the chairperson of the Policing Board is right, and is that not something else that needs to be tackled?

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman makes a point that demonstrates once again why we need devolved government in Stormont. I have met the chair of the Policing Board, and I have also spoken to the Chief Constable about this matter. They are both keen that political representation on the Policing Board should be
restored as soon as possible so that there is proper governance. I will be in Washington at the end of the week for the St Patrick’s day events there, and I believe that the chair of the Policing Board will be there too, and I hope to catch up with her and discuss how we might make that a reality.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents in Kettering were under the clear impression that the main purpose in life of Sinn Féin was to avoid at all costs direct rule from Westminster. Is it not clear but ironic that by refusing to reach an agreement with the DUP Sinn Féin has brought about exactly the thing that it has always campaigned to avoid?

Karen Bradley: I do not want to get into the whys and wherefores of what happened in the talks process. All I know is that all parties have given me a very strong commitment that they want to go back into devolved government, and I am seeking to find ways to make that a reality.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I listened carefully to the Secretary of State’s statement and noted that she was decisive in announcing an increase in rates in Northern Ireland. I was extremely disappointed, to put it mildly, that she continues to dither about cutting the salaries of MLAs. Does she not recognise and accept that it is morally indefensible that MLAs should continue to receive their full salary in the absence of a functioning Assembly for 14 months?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady sums up the comments that have been made to me by members of the public across Northern Ireland, but I do want to make sure that everybody has the chance to make representations on this matter, so that the power we can legislate for in Westminster is used appropriately. I also want to say, as I have said to her at the Select Committee, that, although there are good grounds to look at the pay of MLAs, I do not think the pay for staff should be affected. I think we would all agree that our staff do fantastic work and they need to be properly remunerated for the great work they do for the constituents of the MLAs.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I welcome the statement, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the fact that this year, unlike with the previous budget, she has had to take some decisions that could not have been thought through by the Executive before they fell means that today we are several steps further towards direct rule than we were a couple of weeks ago?

Karen Bradley: I do not agree with my hon. Friend. A budget needed to be balanced. These steps were taken to balance it. I have done so while being consistently mindful of the need to make sure we maintain the position of restoring devolved government wherever possible.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In welcoming the statement, I concur with others in wishing the Secretary of State a happy birthday. Going out to consultation on the MLA salary issue and the office costs allowances is a good move. Does she agree that it would be intolerable to move on that if the House were not also to move on the issue of MPs from Sinn Féin? They deliberately boycott this House, whereas MLAs are prevented from doing their full job.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. He will know that the matter he raises is one for the House, but the House will have heard the strong words from both sides on the matter.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): May I start by paying tribute to my right hon. Friend and her predecessor for their tireless work to try to restore devolved government to Northern Ireland? Will she reaffirm that her clear commitment to working for that restoration of devolved government goes hand in hand with her clear commitment to ensuring that, while that work goes on, through this budget the people of Northern Ireland continue to receive the services and investment they need?

Karen Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He seems to have a frog in his throat and he did well to deliver his question without starting to cough too much. I agree that it would just not be tolerable for the UK Government to not do what was necessary to enable public services to continue to be delivered. The people I have met in Northern Ireland have been very dedicated public servants and they do deserve that, so that they can continue to deliver the schools, hospitals and policing, and all other manner of public services, that the people of Northern Ireland need.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that some fundamental decisions cannot be taken in Northern Ireland at the moment. How long will she go on accepting that before she decides that we have to go further and appoint Ministers? Will she make a decision in the next month, please, on the Commonwealth youth games, which are to be held in Northern Ireland in 2021? If a decision is not taken by the end of this month, we will lose those games.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady, who was a great sports Minister, knows exactly what the problem is, and I remember it from my previous brief. Belfast has been awarded the 2021 Commonwealth games but the absence of an Executive and Ministers to sign the appropriate documentation and contractual information means that there is great difficulty. I am looking at how we can resolve many of these issues, and that one is certainly on my table at the moment.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, particularly the long overdue announcement that some action will be taken on MLAs’ pay. She said in her statement that she is looking for full and final representations from the Northern Irish parties. Will she also be seeking further representations from voluntary sector, third sector and community groups, many of which have had to fill the gap left by MLAs? Not only are they not carrying out parliamentary duties, but many of them have been completely absent in their constituencies.

Karen Bradley: I would welcome representations from all. Trevor Reaney’s work and recommendations, for which I thank him, are very valuable and helpful, but it would also be helpful to hear the views of all parties and all sides on this matter.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): We welcome the fact that the Government have now announced a budget for Northern Ireland. Does the Secretary of State recognise that hundreds of decisions about how
that money is spent require some input from a Minister? Will she give a commitment that those issues will be addressed by the promises she has made to the House today to look at further measures?

Karen Bradley: On the budget I have spoken about today, I am confident that the direction is there for civil servants to deliver as required and as wanted by all parties. The right hon. Gentleman is right that many decisions are awaited. It is frustrating for all of us, as it is for him, that in the absence of devolved administration in Northern Ireland some of those decisions have not yet been taken.

Michelle Donelan (Chippingham) (Con): I agree with my right hon. Friend. It is deeply regrettable that she has had to take the actions set out today in regard to a budget for Northern Ireland, which are no substitute for local Ministers on the ground making decisions. Will she assure the House that she will do everything to prevent any return to direct rule?

Karen Bradley: My priority is to restore devolved government in Northern Ireland. For the good of the Union and for the good of the people of Northern Ireland, that is the right thing to do. It is also worth putting on the record that that is the primary aim of the Irish Government as well. I want to put on the record my thanks for their support in the talks process, and I know that they are committed to restoring devolved government, as we are.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Could the Minister set a timetable for her consideration of a halfway house on some of the scrutiny issues that have been mentioned by Members across the House? She would have support on allowing MLAs to table questions, to meet as committees and to scrutinise decisions. As a direct rule Minister, I know there were hundreds and hundreds of decisions taken every day by Ministers that are now not being taken. There needs to be scrutiny of those taking those decisions.

Karen Bradley: I know the right hon. Gentleman is right in saying that these decisions are awaited. It is frustrating for all of us, as it is for him, that in the absence of devolved administration in Northern Ireland some of those decisions have not yet been taken.

Owen Smith: It was 2005-06.

Karen Bradley: I am being corrected by the Opposition Front Bench.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It doesn’t happen very often.

Karen Bradley: It always happens.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that these decisions do need to be taken. We do want to see devolved government. We want decisions and scrutiny to be undertaken in Stormont. That is the right place for those things to happen. I am not going to put a timeframe on it because we need to find something that has consent. As he will know, under the Belfast agreement, for constitutional changes in Northern Ireland, we would need the consent of all communities. Therefore, I do need to work through all the suggestions that have been put to me, but I would welcome suggestions from him, given his extensive experience of doing the job.
institutional abuse and on legacy. Will the Secretary of State confirm that she has been informed by Departments that, unless key decisions are made, and made urgently, they will not be able to balance the budgets in those Departments for the next year?

Karen Bradley: That is not the advice that I have had from permanent secretaries. The hon. Lady is right to refer to two additional issues: the concerns about legacy and about the victims of institutional abuse. On legacy, the UK Government are committed to consulting on the Stormont House agreement and to setting up the relevant bodies. On historical abuse, the Hart inquiry was set up by the Executive before it collapsed, so it is constitutionally very difficult for any other party or Government to consider its recommendations; it was not a review instigated by the UK Parliament or UK Government. The hon. Lady absolutely describes the tension of the situation we are operating within.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for the statement and wish her many happy returns. It is interesting to note that the message that we are receiving from civil servants and permanent secretaries is that they cannot move on and make decisions as to where money should be spent. In the absence of an Assembly, and given that there is unlikely to be one for the foreseeable future, it is vital that we have Ministers making decisions—if not the Secretary of State, it should be other Ministers. When is that going to happen?

Karen Bradley: I have attempted to deliver in the budget the financial certainty that is needed to enable the public services to continue. If devolved government were up and running in Stormont, Ministers in Stormont would be able to amend the way in which the budget operates, but I have done what I had to do to enable public services to continue and for public servants to have some certainty, within the restrictions of what is possible for me as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I wish the Secretary of State many happy returns; she has had cross-party agreement on that. I understand her caution, concern and reluctance to advance issues of direct rule but, on the statement and on providing a soft landing for that perpetual glide path that we have had for the past 14 months, may I encourage her to be bold and to provide the political opportunities for decision making for the benefits and interests of all the people in Northern Ireland, and to do so with confidence?

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his good wishes. I am committed to the Belfast agreement and the institutions that were set up under it. I want things to be in such a position that those institutions can be up and running and delivering for the people of Northern Ireland, with the politicians they elected delivering for them. That is what I am determined to do and I do not want to undermine that in any way. That is the very difficult balancing act that I have been operating under. I wanted to make sure that civil servants have the certainty and money that they need, but without undermining anything. I would welcome any suggestions from the hon. Gentleman and others about the sort of constitutional arrangements that could be put in place to get us back to devolved government.
United States Tariffs: Steel and Aluminium

7.5 pm

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): On Thursday 8 March, President Trump announced that the United States would impose a tariff of 25% on steel imports and a 10% tariff on aluminium imports after a period of 15 days, with the final day being 23 March. Canada and Mexico, with which the United States is renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement, have been exempted from the tariffs, subject to the successful conclusion of the NAFTA negotiations. For the products within the scope of the investigation, in 2017, the US accounted for 7% of UK steel exports and 3% of UK aluminium exports. In addition, the UK accounted for 1% of US steel imports and 0.1% of US aluminium imports in tonnage, at a value of £360 million and £29 million respectively. The President outlined that there is scope for further countries and certain products to be exempted from the tariffs.

From a UK perspective, as Members of this House know, the UK and the US are strong partners and allies, and the US-UK economic and security relationship is crucial. The US is our largest single-nation trading partner and accounts for a fifth of all exports, worth more than £100 billion a year. It is also the top destination for outward direct investment by the UK and the single biggest source of inward investment into the UK. We have a long-standing and special relationship with the US; however, that does not mean that if we disagree with something, we will not say so, and we do disagree with the US decision to implement tariffs on steel and aluminium imports based on national security considerations. Such unilateral trade measures have weak foundations in international law and are not consistent with the Department of Defence’s own judgment in an investigation that was conducted on the basis of national security.

There is undoubtedly a problem of overcapacity in the global steel market, but our strong view is that a global problem requires a global solution, not unilateral action. The UK has worked hard to address the issue of overcapacity. The Prime Minister called for a forum of G20 members to tackle this issue, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy attended in Berlin in November; the forum agreed comprehensive policy solutions. Most recently, the Prime Minister raised it during her visit to China, which is the world’s leading producer of steel and aluminium products. The UK will continue to work within the rules-based international trade system to tackle this problem.

Since the President asked the Department of Commerce to launch the investigation into the national security impact of steel and aluminium imports last April, the Government have made clear to the Administration on repeated occasions the potentially damaging impact of tariffs on the UK and the EU steel and aluminium industries. The Prime Minister has raised her concerns directly with President Trump. I have spoken on several occasions to the Commerce Secretary and to the US trade representative about the investigation, including this afternoon. I spoke again today to the director general of the World Trade Organisation, Roberto Azevêdo, and I regularly speak to the EU Trade Commissioner, Cecilia Malmström. Several of my Cabinet colleagues have raised this issue with their opposite numbers. The Government have worked closely with the EU as part of our unified response. In addition, I assure right hon. and hon. colleagues that we have been in regular contact with the UK steel and aluminium industry throughout. I spoke to Gareth Stace at the weekend and again this afternoon.

There are two routes to petition the US for exemptions from the tariffs. The first, overseen by the US trade representative, will exempt countries with which the US has a strong national security relationship and which agree alternative means to address the threat to US national security from the relevant imports. The second, overseen by the Department of Commerce, will evaluate product exemptions if it is deemed there is no domestic US alternative and there are national security considerations, but only after a request for exclusion is made by a directly affected party located in the United States.

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be assisting UK industry in working with US customers to build their cases for the exemption of individual products. I will be travelling to Washington this week for face-to-face meetings with the US trade representative, Ambassador Lightizer, and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross as well as leading members of Congress. I will be making the case for the UK as part of the EU. We have a strong defence and security co-operation relationship. As close allies in NATO, permanent members of the UN Security Council and nuclear powers, close co-operation between the UK and the US is vital to international peace and security.

As the House is aware, our current membership of the European Union means that the European Commission will be co-ordinating the EU response, and we have been clear that we will continue to adhere to the duty of sincere co-operation. The EU response is focused on three possible areas. First, the European Commission is preparing to introduce immediate duties on the US ahead of a World Trade Organisation dispute. The EU has shared a draft list of proposed items for duties and we expect it to publish this list early next week. Secondly, the EU can apply a safeguard measure of its own to protect the steel and aluminium industries from being damaged by an influx of exports to the EU caused by the displacing effect of US tariffs. Thirdly, the EU can pursue a dispute at the WTO. We are currently evaluating all aspects of these responses together.

We are clear that it is right to seek to defend our domestic industries from the direct and indirect impacts of the US tariffs, protecting both jobs and industrial capacity. We will also press for any response from the EU to be measured and proportionate. It is important that the UK and EU response works within the boundaries of the rules-based international trading system. Over the coming days, we will be working closely with British industry and the EU to seek swift clarification and mitigation. I commend this statement to the House.

7.12 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and for his telephone call over the weekend.
The world steel industry is on the verge of a crisis. In our domestic industry, 32,000 workers in the steel industry are facing an existential threat to their jobs. Many of those men and women are angry that it has taken the Secretary of State more than 10 days since President Trump’s initial announcement to come to this House and make a statement about the impact that this might have on their communities and what measures the Government are taking to protect their livelihoods. They expected better, and they had a right to do so, but I assure the Secretary of State that, for our part, the official Opposition will not seek to make this issue one of party political point scoring. Everyone in this House must work together. We will be constructively critical where we consider the Government can do better, but our fundamental position will be to work with the Government to achieve the best outcome for our steel communities, for our aluminium industry and for our wider economy.

The Secretary of State is correct that the fundamental cause of this crisis is overcapacity in the global market and a long-standing failure by Governments around the world to tackle dumping and unfair practices, but he should not have acknowledged that this included his own Government. We have not forgotten that it was the Conservative Government in 2016 who sought to block EU plans to impose tougher tariffs on aggressive Chinese steel imports. Global over-supply has seen other countries dump their surplus—a surplus often created by actionable subsidies and lax enforcement of labour standards and workers’ rights—at less than market value.

Although the global situation has not been created by President Trump, the manner in which he has gone about trying to resolve its impact on US producers is fundamentally wrong and threatens to tip a very bad situation into a full-scale global trade crisis. The application of 25% tariffs on steel and 10% on aluminium imports into the United States is unjust and unjustifiable. The suggestion that such tariffs are necessary under section 232 to mitigate a threat to American national security is patently false. The US Secretary of Defence himself has publicly stated that US military requirements represent no more than 3% of US steel production and that the Department of Defence is able to acquire the steel and aluminium it needs for US national defence requirements. The UK steel industry has made it clear that the amount of UK steel exports to the United States military industrial complex is “very small indeed”.

The Secretary of State says that Trump’s tariffs have weak foundations in international law. In fact they have none. The truth is that the President is seeking to bully and threaten his trading partners to bring them weakened to the negotiating table. The temporary exemption for Canada and Mexico, making their position subject to a renegotiation of NAFTA that is favourable to the USA, is just one example. He is doing the same with the UK and Europe, where he wishes to reverse the US trade deficit.

Given that the Secretary of State accepts that the tariffs are unjustified, I ask him to consider that the two routes he outlined for petitioning for exemptions from them is to act as if they have a spurious legitimacy. This is precisely the trap that President Trump has set: “Negotiate with us and we will not bully you further.” In the part of Glasgow where I grew up, that was called a protection racket. If the Secretary of State does go down this route of trying to secure an exemption, will he give a commitment now to be totally transparent about any price that he has to pay and any assurances that he has to give to the US Administration in order to get it? It is reported that, following the Australian Foreign Minister’s meeting with Rex Tillerson, these tariffs may not be applied to Australia. However, it has also been reported that Australia has had to concede to American demands for a bilateral security agreement, which would see Australia forced to commit to greater military spending. Will the Secretary of State also be clear about how any such attempt by the UK to secure an exemption sits with the duty of sincere co-operation, to which he rightly referred in his statement?

President Trump is imposing these tariffs on national security grounds precisely because, under WTO rules, this means that article 21 of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade would not apply. This specifically prevents member states of the WTO from demanding clarity on the grounds of such pronouncements and prevents them from commencing dispute proceedings or taking retaliatory action. The President is seeking to undermine the multilateral rules-based system of the WTO, to which he has long been opposed. He has said that he would welcome a trade war and thinks that America could win it. He cares nothing for the viability of UK producers who have respected the rules. He is treating them no differently from their competitors who have not. As the US market closes to our exports, countries that would otherwise export into the US will seek to divert their production to the UK, which will tend to undercut domestic producers here even further.

What action is the Secretary of State taking to defend against this trade divergence? He must recognise that our industry is particularly vulnerable because we have a Government who pride themselves on taking the weakest possible approach to remedying unfair practices by their adherence to the lesser duty rule. Both the Trade Bill and the Taxation (Cross-Border Trade) Bill currently going through Parliament were opposed by the Labour party precisely because they proposed to create what the Manufacturing Trade Remedies Alliance described as “one of the weakest trade remedy regimes in the world.”

Will the Secretary of State say whether he will consider tabling Government amendments to strengthen both the statutory representation function of the Trade Remedies Authority and the powers available to it, in line with the amendments proposed by the Opposition in Committee?

The Secretary of State spoke of the retaliatory measures that the EU Commission is preparing. What assessment has his Department made of the legal rights to recourse under article 8 of the WTO agreement on safeguards and what representation has he made to the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Trade in relation to these measures? Is he persuaded that they would be lawful? Is he persuaded that they would be effective?

The Secretary of State is fond of painting international trade as a balance of consumer and producer interests. The fear of thousands of steel and aluminium workers in the UK is that he naturally leans too far in favour of lower prices for the consumer. He needs to prove to them that he will stand up for British industry, for their jobs and for their communities. They need confidence that he will tackle unfair practices that distort the market. If he does, he will have the Opposition’s full support.
Dr Fox: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his co-operation over the weekend and for some of the constructive suggestions he made about how we might apply some further pressure to those US producers to enable them to seek exemptions for imports from the UK. He is right that there is overcapacity. The G20 global forum on steel excess capacity has made 28 recommendations. We now wait to see whether China will implement those recommendations, which is the key to sorting out the global overcapacity issue.

We have regularly said that we do not believe that section 232 was an appropriate vehicle for carrying out this investigation. Not only does the UK send some specifically high-end steel products into the United States that the US market is not necessarily able to provide for itself, so tariffs will apply an unavoidable increase in cost to American inputs, but we sell some specialist steel into the American military programme, making action taken against the United Kingdom on a national security ground quite an absurdity.

The hon. Gentleman is right to mention the sincere co-operation. I have made it very clear to the Commission that we continue to operate on that basis and that we will replicate the EU’s trade remedies systems as we leave the European Union. I remind him, though, that the Labour party voted against the setting up of the Trade Remedies Authority, not the issues that relate to its operation. That was a dangerous thing to do. However, it is right that we regard this as a national issue. There is no fundamental difference between us on the basis on which the section 232 investigation was conducted, nor on the options that we believe the European Union should take as a response.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State stress to the EU that it is in our interests to try to take some of the tension out of this festering dispute, rather than to take it on to another height, given that the President is already talking about tariffs against German cars, for example? It is surely in our interests to get back to tariff-free or low-tariff business.

Dr Fox: The EU is taking countermeasures because the EU views section 232 itself as a safeguard. Any action that the United States were to take in response to that would be completely out of line with international trade law, as well as exacerbating an already tense situation.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): This really is a blow to those right-wing, free-market Brexiteers who argue that the US will welcome a trade deal with open arms. Anyone looking at the somewhat unhinged tweets coming out of President Trump’s office will tell us otherwise. Given the Secretary of State’s nationality and where he was brought up, I am interested to know whether he has raised the matter specifically of Scottish steel and aluminium, and the steel industry’s impact on all nations of the UK. It was in 1992 that his Conservative Government closed Ravenscraig in Scotland, decimating 1,200 jobs and livelihoods, and it was the Scottish National party Government in Scotland who brought back into production the steelworks in Clydebridge and Dalzell and the aluminium smelter in Lochaber. We are fed up in Scotland with clearing up his Government’s mess and we do not want to have to do it again.

We know from recent reports in the press that the geographical indicators of products such as Scotch whisky could be under threat in a US-UK trade deal. The Secretary of State may have seen the article in The Scotsman last week suggesting that Scotch whisky is “among the products that could carry a ‘Made in America’ tag after Brexit.”

It further said:

“US lobbyists are calling for the UK to drop geographical name protections after Brexit to allow supermarkets to import American copies.”

That would be outrageous.

Will the Secretary of State commit to protecting our valuable steel and aluminium industries and not to trading off our vital GIs for Scotch whisky in any trade deals? Given that a Tory Brexit would reduce UK GDP by 5% and put at risk some of our key exports, will he finally reconsider his approach to Brexit and admit that he was wrong in suggesting that leaving the EU single market and customs union could somehow be overcome by magical trade deals with the US and the EU that were going to be, in his words, the “easiest in human history”?

Dr Fox: It is not long since I remember the SNP being delighted at some of Mr Trump’s tweets, when he was having some of his relationships with the previous SNP leader.

We can best tackle this issue as a united United Kingdom in line with our European Union partners. The hon. Lady dares to raise the issue of GI. These matters are in the roll-over of the EU trade agreement for which we are trying to get continuity in our current Trade Bill and the customs Bill. She needs to understand that she actually voted against the roll-over of those Bills that would have given the very protections for which she is asking.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): In its condemnation of President Trump’s proposed steel tariff, the EU has implicitly accepted that it would be a similarly retrograde step to impose tariffs or engage in retaliatory measures with key trading partners. How will my right hon. Friend be using the President’s announcement to make the case for open frictionless trade with the EU post Brexit and to assert the UK’s position as a leading proponent of free trade in the 21st century?

Dr Fox: We are seeing the sort of problems that come from introducing protectionist measures. Tariffs will very seldom—for any length of time—successfully protect a domestic industry. They are likely to add cost to the inputs for that economy. In the United States, where 140,000 people are employed in the production of steel, there are also 6.5 million people in industries dependent on steel usage who will not be helped by an increase in the price. My hon. Friend makes a good point. We should all be recommitting ourselves to an open, liberal, global trading system, rather than considering impediments to it.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): If the Secretary of State wants to rebuff Donald Trump’s claim that these tariffs are for national security reasons, he need only look at the President’s tweet from six hours ago, in which he starts off down the avenue of saying,
“Oh, what about European farming tariffs or manufacturing tariffs?” It is quite clear that the Secretary of State and the European Union should be able to drive a coach and horses through the national security nonsense that the American President is putting up. Will the Secretary of State at least see this as an opportunity for us to work with our partners in the European Union and to use the leverage that we have in that alliance of 500 million customers to ensure that the Americans cannot walk all over us?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. A load of constituencies are affected. May I suggest that we have short answers and short questions, so that hon. Members can get in?

**Dr Fox:** We will work with our partners in the European Union because we are under a duty of sincere co-operation and because it makes sense to do so, but many other countries that are not members of the European Union are affected, and they will also make their voices known.

**Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con):** My right hon. Friend has rightly mentioned that many of the UK’s exports are very high value and specialised and that many of the supplies go to the United States military. Does he have an opinion at this stage whether the product exemption or the country exemption route offers the best hope for gaining an advantage for the United Kingdom?

**Dr Fox:** My hon. Friend asks a very good question, but it is difficult to answer until we can explore in greater detail with the US authorities exactly what the details will mean. In any case, whichever routes are the best to gain exemptions for the United Kingdom and the European Union are the ones that we want to follow.

**Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab):** What is the Secretary of State’s view on comments in the past 10 days regarding a tit-for-tat approach—for example, with peanut butter, cranberry juice and other products that are consumed here? Is this a good and sensible approach?

**Dr Fox:** The hon. Lady asks a good question. As I said, the EU intends to impose countermeasures under article 8 of the World Trade Organisation safeguards agreement, because it believes that section 232 itself is a safeguard. The EU is therefore entitled to respond to that. Let me say, though, that this constant upping of the ante regarding what may happen and what countermeasures may be taken is not a sensible way for us to approach global trade. If she is suggesting that it would be wise for everyone to keep the temperature down, I entirely agree—100%.

**Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con):** I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement in terms of its content and its tone. Free trade is about being free to trade within the agreed rules; it is not about a free-for-all. May I strongly encourage him to reiterate that message both to the United States and to China?

**Dr Fox:** I take every opportunity to do so. It is worth remembering that we have in the United States a number of those who very strongly agree with us, not least inside the American business lobby, many of whom may be harmed as a result of the measures that may be undertaken. We also have very strong and vocal allies in the US Congress, and I very much welcome them making their voices known in recent days.

**Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op):** I would be very concerned if the Government were pinning all their hopes on an exemption either for the UK or for the European Union, because there will still be a substantial knock-on effect of further dumping on our shores by the countries that behave badly when they are shut out of the US. Has the Secretary of State done an impact assessment for the British steel industry on the knock-on effect of further global overcapacity as a result of these tariffs?

**Dr Fox:** We are working alongside the industry to look at that. My colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are engaged in that work. The hon. Lady knows that Skinningrove is a very good example of what I was discussing earlier. It is one of the areas where we make specialist steel that goes into the US programme, so the concept that we should be taken to task on a national security basis for providing the US with something that it needs for its own security programme does not make much sense.

**Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con):** It seems to me that tariffs and protectionism fundamentally undermine the industries that they seek to protect. Can the Secretary of State confirm that it remains the British Government’s position that we are committed to world-wide free trade? Will he be seeking in some way to gain a bilateral opt-out from these tariffs as soon as we are able to do so?

**Dr Fox:** As I have said, we will work alongside the European Union because we have a duty of sincere co-operation for as long as we are members. I have often taken the view that it is strange that people should want us to obey the rules when we want them and not when we do not want them. We have a legal duty as EU members to fulfil this. We intend to do so, and we will work with our EU partners accordingly. As a country—this has been true under Governments of both colours—we have believed in free trade. We have been a global champion of free trade. Let us remember that free trade is the means by which we have taken 1 billion people out of abject poverty in a generation, and we as a country should be very proud that we have been in the lead in that.

**Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD):** Can the Secretary of State give us some examples of how he has been able to use our close and special trading relationship with the United States to develop his vision of an open, liberal, multilateral trading system?

**Dr Fox:** As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we are unable to conduct an independent trade policy for as long as we are members of his beloved European Union. We have a trade working group with the United States. We are looking at short-term liberalisation. We are looking at the areas that we might look at in a future free trade agreement. We are looking at co-operation in the WTO when we leave. As he sits and looks, for some reason, very smug, he would do well to remember his comments from yesterday, which were as mean-spirited as they were wrong in substance.
Dr Fox: We hope that we can persuade the United States of an EU exemption so that we do not need to go down this particular route. I hope that sense will prevail. The hon. Gentleman is quite right to raise the 2002 issue. At that point, there was a great deal of activity where an alliance between the free trade elements in Congress and the business community in the United States came together to change the mind of the Administration at that time. I hope that such a combination would be successful this time.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): As we have heard, President Trump’s announcement has caused widespread concern within America itself. What steps will the Government be taking to exert pressure on President Trump not only from the outside, as part of the EU, but from the inside, in terms of the American political and trading establishments?

Dr Fox: As I have said, there is a great deal of opinion inside Congress, within both parties, that this is a mistaken route to take. In recent days, I have had discussions with, for example, Paul Ryan on this very subject. We should be trying to mobilise all the allies we can. I mentioned earlier the co-operation from the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner). It is very important that we deal with this not just politically and through business, in that there is a role for the trade unions to play in talking to their opposite numbers in the United States where industries that are users of steel could potentially be damaged should the price of that steel rise as a result of tariffs. We can take a multi-layered approach to dealing with this issue, and we have a duty to use every one of the levers that we have.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Diversionary dumping is also the crucial issue for steelworkers at the Celsa plant in my own constituency. Does the Secretary of State not find it ironic that he is talking about the importance of working together across the EU to put in place the safeguards that are so necessary while at the same time advocating pulling us away from that and swimming against the tide alone? When he is speaking to his US counterparts, will he remind them that every single US state lost jobs as a result of George W. Bush’s actions in 2002?

Dr Fox: As I have said, the EU can take counter measures on the basis that it believes that this is a safeguard. It could also make a safeguard of its own if it felt that a surge of displaced steel product was damaging our own market. I remind the hon. Gentleman that this is not just a dispute between the United States and the EU but involves all the countries in the world who are steel producers. The WTO is much bigger than the EU, and we will not be leaving the WTO as we are a founder member.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for referencing Skinningrove in his answer to the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), because, as he rightly says, there would be a serious threat to that plant as it produces very high-grade steel. Will he commit to all the necessary support for Skinningrove, especially given that the core products produced there for Caterpillar, an American firm, are not produced in the US market, and therefore pose no threat to US jobs?
Dr Fox: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The exports from Skinningrove to Caterpillar make up about 25% of the site’s output and he is right to say that US producers have poor capability in regard to this product. The application of tariffs is therefore likely to result in a rise in input costs, which would be to no one’s economic benefit.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): We all hope that these tariffs will not be imposed on 23 March, but if they are, what steps will the Government commit to taking in order to support steelmaking in this country and our steelmaking communities?

Dr Fox: That date, 23 March, is not quite the deadline that it might appear. My initial discussions with the US Department of Commerce and the Office of the United States Trade Representative have made it clear that the period of exemption will continue some way beyond the initial introduction. Clearly, if there are going to be exemptions for the EU or the UK, we would want to see them introduced as early as possible. We will continue to push for exemption on the basis that I have set out today.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): When my right hon. Friend travels to Washington later this week, will he be accompanied by representatives from Brussels? Obviously, we are still an EU member and cannot act unilaterally—yet.

Dr Fox: I do not require a babysitter from the EU on my visit to Washington. We are in continuous contact with Commissioner Malmström and her team, because this is an issue that affects us all. It would affect us whether we were in the European Union or not, however, because these actions are being taken not just against the EU but against all steel producers globally, all of whom will be equally affected.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Did the Secretary of State, or for that matter the European Union, have advance knowledge of President Trump’s statement on 1 March? Either way, what does this say about future relationships with the President?

Dr Fox: I am not sure how many people, if any, had advance notice of President Trump’s initial announcement.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What representations has my right hon. Friend made to China with regard to tackling the global overcapacity of steel?

Dr Fox: As I have said, through the work that we are doing multilaterally, there are currently 28 outstanding recommendations that we expect China to apply. The Prime Minister raised this matter on her recent visit to China, and we are continuing the conversation. We understand China’s need for the production of aluminium and steel for export and for its domestic use, but if we are going to have a rules-based system, the rules need to be obeyed. They also need to be transparent, and we need to have sufficient information to determine whether the WTO rules are still effective.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): If faced with a trade war, what post-Brexit trade defence mechanisms would little Britain employ against the might of the US economy?

Dr Fox: As I have said, the whole aim of policy at present in the UK, the European Union and beyond is to try to temper these proposals and to get exemptions so that we do not feel any of the impetus that might lead to an escalation of the current position.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): As tariffs go, 25% is particularly high and could lead to all sorts of unforeseen consequences. Is there any evidence that there will be trade diversion to the UK as a result of the US imposition of 25% tariffs?

Dr Fox: It is quite difficult to know in advance where there might be diversion. Again I make the point that our aim is not to deal with the consequences but to prevent the imposition of the proposed tariffs in the first place.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Secretary of State jokes that it is not clear that anyone knew about the President’s announcement before he made it, but it is worse than that. Sometimes, it looks as though the President himself does not know what he is about to announce, even when he has started to announce it. All too often, it involves a tweet in search of a policy. Are not the really disturbing matters not only the growth of protectionism in America but the false promise that it offers to some of the poorest people in the United States, who in the end will not benefit one jot from it?

Dr Fox: The hon. Gentleman makes an even better point than he thinks he has—[Interruption.] Or, in his case, possibly not. In recent years, we have seen a worrying trend among G20 countries to impose protectionist measures. In 2010, we saw about 300 non-tariff barriers to trade being operated by the G20. By 2015, that figure had risen to around 1,200, so there has been a gradual move away from the concept of global free trade and a temptation for countries to impose non-tariff barriers. In addition to making the economic case, we should remember that those countries that have benefited from free trade should not be pulling up the drawbridge behind them and denying those benefits to developing countries.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is China doing anything at all to help to cut the global oversupply of steel?

Dr Fox: That is a discussion that we are having constantly with China. It says that it is taking measures to reduce it, but as I have said, there are 28 recommendations outstanding, and only time will tell whether we are witnessing the correct action or merely the rhetoric.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Given what President Trump said during his election, none of us should really be surprised by this. If the Secretary of State does not manage to change the mind of the United States Government when he goes to Washington, and if they offer the United Kingdom an exemption, would that exemption come in from March 2019 or would it have to be subject to the almost ridiculous implementation period?

Dr Fox: Any exemption given by the United States will be in US law and will be determined by the US President, not by the US Congress and far less by European law.
Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Close co-operation between the UK and the US is vital to international peace. One route to petitioning the US for exemptions to the proposed tariffs would be to demonstrate the strong link with national security. How confident is my right hon. Friend that we can make a strong case on those grounds?

Dr Fox: Of course we have a strong national security linkage through our relationship in the Security Council and through being nuclear powers in the world, but it is always worth reminding our US colleagues who was alongside them in Iraq and Afghanistan and in many of the other conflicts that the United States has been involved in. The United Kingdom has never been found wanting as a loyal and steadfast partner in our bilateral security and in global security more generally.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Seeking exemptions from the US steel tariffs will not in itself protect the UK’s steel industry from dumped diverted steel from the American market. Will the Secretary of State undertake to work with the EU to ensure that whatever measures are necessary to preserve the UK’s steel industry are taken, and to work with the WTO to establish a more rational anti-dumping regime internationally?

Dr Fox: That is what we in the WTO are for. Its purpose is to ensure that there is a rules-based system and that the rules are applied, and that when the rules are not applied, there is sufficient mitigation to help those countries that are affected. In all the things that the hon. Gentleman has just mentioned, that is where we regard our duty as lying.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): As the Secretary of State will know from visiting Goodwin International in my constituency, Britain is a world leader in the specialist precision engineering of steel products. This is important not only for our British industry but for supplying US defence with equipment. How can we ensure that the US recognises that fact, so that those vital British products can continue to be exported to the States?

Dr Fox: The US Department of Defence has made it quite clear that it fully understands the contribution that the United Kingdom makes. Its report made it clear that it did not believe the use of section 232 was the appropriate means of dealing with concerns about global overcapacity. I hope that the good sense of the Department of Defence will be diffused throughout Washington.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): May I commend to the Secretary of State the experience of Bombardier? In recent months, it risked losing thousands of jobs because of unfairly imposed US tariffs of 300%. The winning formula for defeating that proposal—and having it unanimously thrown out in the US—involves a combination of trade unions, management, local MPs and Ministers right across the Government, along with the personal intervention of the Prime Minister when she spoke to President Trump at the Davos economic summit. That strategy worked for Bombardier, so may I commend it to the Secretary of State and suggest that it is repeated in order to protect the steel industry in the United Kingdom?

Dr Fox: We have had, as I said earlier, a wide range of contacts in a wide range of areas. The International Trade Commission was ultimately the vehicle that sorted out the Bombardier case, so there are still in the United States those elements of an independent, free trading policy that we can rely on, on occasions when they are needed. It was not just the politics ultimately, hard though we tried for Bombardier, but the American mechanism itself—the ITC—that has a lot to be commended for.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Today it is steel and aluminium. Tomorrow it could easily be the photonics industry, which Torbay businesses that sell to the United States are part of. On Commonwealth Day, will the Secretary of State reassure me that we are also talking with our allies within the Commonwealth about what we can do to defeat a policy that will be as negative for the United States and for them as it will be for us?

Dr Fox: I said in an earlier answer that the people who have the most to lose if we move away from a global concept of free trade are the world’s poorest. If we genuinely want people to be able to trade their way out of poverty, they can only do it in a genuinely free trading environment, and the more non-tariff barriers that advanced countries put up, the less chance they have of doing so. It is in everybody’s interests to pursue a global free trade policy. This country has always shown the way on that, and this Government will continue to show the way.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Last but certainly not least, Dr David Drew.

Dr Drew: With regard to what the Secretary of State just said, will he do all he can to intercede with not just the US but the EU to make sure that agricultural products do not become part of a wider trade war? It is essential for the reasons he gave that less developed countries have continued access to all those markets.

Dr Fox: We can end on a note of perfect harmonisation, because there is no doubt that the more we can dismantle of the common external tariff that the EU currently has to the benefit of developing countries, the better. At last we have found a note of consensus.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Financial Guidance and Claims Bill will not be taken today, so we will deal with the next statement, and the rest of business will be completed. After the next statement, we will take points of order.
Protection of Civilians in Afrin

7.52 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to update the House on the situation in Afrin.

We are closely following developments in Afrin and wider north-western Syria. Over the weekend, Turkish and affiliated forces have continued their territorial gains and are now approaching the town of Afrin itself. We are concerned about recent reports of rising civilian casualties.

The Government have called for de-escalation and the protection of civilians, while recognising Turkey’s legitimate interest in the security of its borders. We will continue to push for a reduction in violence and for consideration of the humanitarian needs of the population in the affected areas. The Prime Minister has raised the need for protection of civilians and proper humanitarian access with President Erdoğan, as has the Foreign Secretary with Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu. The Turkish Government have assured the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that they are working to prevent civilian casualties.

UK-funded partners have been delivering humanitarian assistance in Afrin, including health and protection services. Some of those activities have been suspended due to current hostilities, but our partners continue to meet needs where they are able and are pre-positioning supplies to help to meet the needs of those fleeing the area. That includes health supplies, blankets and food. UNICEF, other UN organisations and the World Health Organisation have temporarily suspended all activities in Afrin due to the recent military action.

As the Foreign Secretary said in his statement of 26 February, we are concerned about the humanitarian consequences of the operation in Afrin. We urge all parties to respect the law of distinction between civilian and military targets, to facilitate access for life-saving humanitarian aid and to allow freedom of movement for those caught up in the violence, in accordance with international humanitarian law.

The Syria conflict will soon enter its eighth year. The UK continues to make every effort to achieve our goals in Syria of defeating the scourge of Daesh and achieving a political settlement that ends the suffering and provides stability for all Syrians and the wider region. There ultimately needs to be a transition to a new, inclusive, non-sectarian Government that can protect the rights of all Syrians, unite the country and end the conflict, but we are pragmatic about how that might take place. Syria’s future must be for Syrians to decide.

As the second largest bilateral humanitarian donor in Syria since 2011, the UK is at the forefront of the humanitarian response and is providing life-saving support to millions of people. Since 2012, across Syria and the region, UK support has delivered 26 million food rations, 9.8 million relief packages, 8 million vaccines and 10 million medical consultations. Last year alone, we provided clean water to more than 5 million people and contributed towards the formal primary and secondary education of more than 700,000 children affected by the crisis.

Ultimately, however, the only way to end the conflict is through a negotiated political settlement. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has emphasised, including to his Turkish counterpart, the importance of a political solution and the defeat of Daesh. That must continue to be at the forefront of international efforts, and we are concerned about the possibility of the diversion of Kurdish fighters from this crucial fight. We remain committed to working closely with Turkey and other allies to find solutions in Syria that provide stability and bring to an end this terrible conflict. I commend this statement to the House.

7.56 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister’s statement and thank him for advance sight of it.

Here we are again: Aleppo, Mosul, Raqqa, today Afrin, and perhaps soon Ghouta. Again and again, we stand here in this House while troops march into a city in the region with little regard for international law or civilian protection, putting hundreds of thousands of people at risk. Again and again, we express in this House our concern, alarm and anger, but it is never enough. It is just not enough. Time and again, those fighting in Syria are consistently failing to take precautions that protect civilians.

Just seven weeks ago, Turkey launched its so-called Operation Olive Branch, to remove what it saw as the Kurdish threat from Afrin. The Minister says that the protection of civilians must be balanced with “Turkey’s legitimate interest in the security of its borders”, but we must be clear: the incursion is neither legitimate nor justified. It should never have been allowed in the first place and has no basis in international law. An olive branch? There could hardly be a less suitable name for the assault.

Since then, even the most conservative reports estimate that several hundred Kurds have died. Shamefully, the Turkish forces have used artillery and other explosive weapons to target civilian areas. The Kurdish Red Crescent reports that in the month after the attacks started, 93 civilians were killed, 24 of them children, and 313 civilians were wounded, 51 of them children. UNICEF reported this morning that more than 1,000 children have died across Syria in just the first two months of 2018. The use of artillery and explosive weapons against residential areas is clearly prohibited by international humanitarian law. It is unforgiveable that they are still being used. This is not an olive branch. It is a stick to beat the Kurdish community with.

The situation is evolving rapidly, so let me set out three particular concerns for the days ahead. According to reports, Turkish forces are advancing on Afrin right now, so we must do whatever we can to protect civilians. First, there are real concerns that when Turkish forces enter Afrin, there will be widespread atrocities as they seek to root out those they call terrorists. It is particularly disturbing to hear reports that at the centre of the assault, working alongside the Turkish army, have been some of the very same jihadists whom the Kurdish forces worked so hard to drive out of northern Syria.

Given the call by those in Afrin for civilians to form a human shield around the city, a siege and an assault on the city are likely to cause severe civilian casualties. What are the UK Government doing to apply pressure on Turkey to stop the assault and to respect international law? Will the Government make it absolutely clear to
Turkey, as a NATO ally, that anything less is unacceptable, and that we can never excuse throwing around the word “terrorism” to justify human rights abuses?

Secondly, The Washington Post has today reported accounts of thousands of Kurds already fleeing from the city of Afrin, fearing for their lives and what will happen if or when the city falls. What reassurance will the Minister provide that refugees and internally displaced people will be granted safe passage, and that the international community, including Britain, will step up to the plate and provide immediate humanitarian aid and long-term support?

Thirdly, let me turn to access for humanitarian aid and for the human rights monitors who can act as one of the greatest deterrents against civilian atrocities. What steps are the Government taking to urge Turkey to allow access for independent monitors to ensure that civilians are protected and that perpetrators of abuses are held to account? Now that UK-funded partners and UN agencies are suspending humanitarian activities, what steps are the Government taking quickly to restore full humanitarian access to Afrin, so that the UK and other partners can get aid in and save lives?

Those in the Kurdish community across the UK are watching, and they deserve to know that the UK is doing absolutely everything we can to help civilians in Afrin.

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions and for the way in which she has approached this subject. She poses some questions that it would be difficult for any Government to answer, but I will do my best. This is an area where the United Kingdom is not present on the ground, where it is difficult to get information out, and where UN workers are not able to operate. There is a limit on what we can actually deliver, but there will be no shortage of effort in trying to do everything that she recommends in terms of protecting civilians.

The hon. Lady is right to say that, once again, this is another part of the overall Syrian tragedy. Whatever the particular circumstances may be, it can all be traced back to a war waged by a President on his own people that will enter its eighth year in just a couple of days’ time. In his oral report to the Security Council on 12 March, the Secretary-General of the UN said: “Syria is bleeding inside and out. There should be only one agenda for all of us: to end the suffering of the Syrian people and find a political solution to the conflict.”

We would all echo that, however hard it might be.

Let me deal with some of the points that the hon. Lady raised, particularly about the way in which this is seen. She gave a picture of how she perceives the situation and how the Kurdish community see it. We are not here to answer for the Turkish authorities, but they plainly take a different view. Their aim is to oust from the territory the YPG, which they see as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers party—the PKK—which is a proscribed terrorist organisation in Turkey and the United Kingdom. That is how they see their situation, which is why we refer to their territorial considerations and security concerns. The most important thing for us at the moment is to do all we can to bring that part of the conflict to an end and to protect people.

On the hon. Lady’s questions, first, in relation to any further assaults, the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister have both been in contact with their respective partners, and our ambassador made representations on the Turkish Government just three days ago on the up-to-date circumstances. I assure the hon. Lady and the House that everything we do is designed to persuade the parties to de-escalate the conflict as quickly as possible, and to allow humanitarian access and meet all other needs there.

Secondly, on what happens to people who flee and whether there are supplies, we have worked with partners to make sure that there are supplies in the area. We cannot get close in to Afrin, but we are doing our best to make sure that the UN agencies and others active in the area have supplies available if people are able to leave. We would wish them to be able to leave—I mentioned in the statement the distinction between civilians and those considered to be fighters—and we will be doing all we can in relation to that.

Thirdly, on access for monitors and the like, we would of course advocate that and we wish to see it, but the brutality and grimness of the war in that region means that there is a gap between anything we would seek in our deliberations in the House and what may be happening on the ground. I wish I could promise the hon. Lady that we will not be back here soon, but I do not think I can. I can, however, promise that we will do all we can to meet the humanitarian needs in the conflict. We recognise the pain being inflicted in the region, which can only end, as the Secretary-General has said, with a political resolution that will encompass all the various elements of the conflict.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, during which he said, “The Turkish Government have assured the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that they are working to prevent civilian casualties.” I take that to be diplomatic code for “We don’t believe you,” and that is supported by all the evidence coming out about the way in which the Turks are conducting this operation. The wretched truth is that our Kurdish allies in the war against the enemies of civilisation are being brutally treated by a NATO ally. Is there anything else we can do about it?

Alistair Burt: The UK has consistently raised the need to protect civilians and to de-escalate the operation. I repeat: the Turkish Government have assured the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that they are working to prevent civilian casualties. We believe the Turkish Government, and we will hold them to their statement.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The devastation in Afrin represents a new front in the ongoing and devastating Syrian crisis—a seven-year civil and proxy war that has killed an estimated 500,000 people. As we all know, the laws of war strictly prohibit attacks targeting civilians or civilian structures, unless they are being used for military purposes, yet since Turkey’s aggressive airstrikes began, the local Kurdish health authority estimates that 220 civilians have died and more than 600 have been injured. The UN has said that the Afrin district, as well as nearby northern Aleppo, has a population of over 320,000, of whom the majority are classified as being in need and over 100,000 are now internally displaced.
To bring this home to my constituency, I have been speaking to a constituent of mine, a Syrian refugee called Kawa from the Afrin region, who was close to tears when he explained what is happening to his family. He told me his family are not safe. It is possible to contact them only every few days, but he spoke this morning to his brother, who said they are under siege and do not know what to do. They have no water, no electricity and not enough food. In his village near Afrin, every window has been shattered by bombs, and many homes are booby-trapped with explosives. Yesterday, his neighbour was killed by a bomb just by opening his front door. There is no safe place to go. These are civilians.

Will the Minister set out how the UK intends to put pressure on Turkey to end unlawful attacks and ensure respect for international humanitarian law? As a key member of the UN Security Council, what progress have the Government made in bringing about a political resolution in accordance with resolution 2254? Finally, on 20 February, the President of Turkey said that Turkey would “cut external aid” to Afrin. What are the UK Government doing to increase aid to the region and ensure that that vital aid gets there?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman started with a brief description of the horrors of this conflict, and in that he is absolutely right. The greater horror is that we have seen in recent times the shredding of the international norms on which we have tried to work for the best part of 70 years since 1945. If the UN Security Council cannot prevent conflict or bring it to an end, if we have moved away from the norm on the use of chemical weapons and that norm is not adhered to by parties on the UN Security Council and if we have seen the tactics of siege and hunger come back into modern warfare, then we risk losing everything that the international order put together after the horrors of the second world war was designed to prevent. Almost every conflict we now come across in the middle east has echoes of that. Unless we find a way to restore that international order, we will be debating this issue longer and it will not be put to rest.

In answer to the hon. Gentleman’s three questions, we will continue to talk to our NATO partner about its need for security and how this operation may be assisting it, and about the distinction it is drawing between humanitarian casualties and the need to protect civilians, and those from whom it seeks to protect its population.

In answer to the hon. Gentleman’s second question about diplomatic efforts, we are doing everything we can to support Staffan de Mistura. There have been some efforts recently. The Sochi and Astana process has come to an end, which means that the Geneva process is now the best bet for the political resolution.

On aid, £2.46 billion is the largest support that the United Kingdom has ever given to protect refugees in a conflict situation. There will be no shortage of support for those who need it, but the best way to help them is to bring the conflict to an end.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My right hon. Friend said that he was pragmatic about how we could move to a negotiated political settlement. Will he set out the milestones he seeks to achieve along that journey?

Alistair Burt: Several have come about recently. The Syrian negotiation committee, which reformed after meetings in Riyadh, now represents Syrian opposition and has Kurdish representatives, in order to present a united front at the Geneva talks. The failure of a secondary process—the Astana process—means, as I said earlier, that there can be more concentration on Geneva. I understand that the special envoy, Staffan de Mistura, is working on a series of boxes so that people can talk about different things and gradually come back together. Most importantly, we continue, through UN efforts and resolutions, to demand humanitarian access and an end to conflict in conflicted areas. Attention should not be moved from the damage done and horrific circumstances in eastern Ghouta, and we call on all parties with a hand in that to desist from it. We also recognise that the seeds of Daesh have not been extinguished and, if any sense of that is lost, the conflict with them will re-arise as well.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Is it not the case that Mr Erdoğan is using the cloak of respectability—NATO—to hide an alliance with al-Qaeda on the ground and engage in this barbarous murder and slaughter of innocent men, women and children? Should not the British Government be absolutely clear that he must now end this offensive, and has not the time come to stop selling arms to this man, who is behaving like a despot?

Alistair Burt: We have been consistent in our calls for the situation to be de-escalated from the very beginning. Turkey is a NATO partner that relies on its partners for help and security. However, within recognising its territorial concerns and its concerns about its own security, we do indeed call for an end to the operations.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): This is an appalling and vindictive vendetta by Turkish forces against our strongest allies on the ground in the battle against Daesh and AQ. Is there absolutely no chance of a UN-brokered ceasefire so that perhaps we can put in peacekeeping forces to protect civilian people?

Alistair Burt: My hon. and gallant Friend speaks with great knowledge about the issues. Of course, UN Security Council resolution 2401 is already in effect, which calls for a 30-day ceasefire across Syria to allow for humanitarian aid and medical evacuations. However, as I said to the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), if calls for ceasefires—including even those in UN resolutions—are not based on practicalities on the ground, they are just disregarded, the impact being that international norms lose all effect. Of course, there should be an opportunity for the situation to be brought to an end so that there can be humanitarian access and the political negotiations that the UN Secretary-General has spoken about can encompass all the various conflicts in Syria, which is the only thing that will bring matters to an end.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): My Kurdish constituents are deeply distressed and angry about what is happening to civilians in Afrin. Hundreds
of people are being killed, and hundreds of thousands are being injured or are fleeing and being displaced. What hope can the Minister give to those people who are suffering so badly?

**Alistair Burt:** The hon. Lady will be aware, as we all are, of the recent press reports and the Sky News coverage over the weekend. I can give her the absolute assurance that the United Kingdom Government, through their repeated representations, are seeking to have the conflict de-escalated. We have been very clear in our contact with our NATO partner and ally so that this part of the conflict can come to an end as swiftly as possible.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** It seems to me that we have misread the Syrian civil war from start to finish. The facts on the ground are that Assad is winning the war: he is going to take eastern Ghouta and is now allied with our allies, the Kurds, in resisting a naked invasion from Turkey, which could involve the slaughter of thousands of innocent civilians. Although the Turks have been very generous in providing safe refuge for millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey itself, surely we should call out this invasion for what it is and, at this crucial moment, stand by the Kurds, without whom we would not have been able to defeat Daesh.

**Alistair Burt:** My hon. Friend is correct in recognising the extraordinary contribution of the Kurdish people across the region, through Syria and Iraq, in pushing back Daesh at a crucial time. However, the complexities of the politics in that area—in parts of Syria and in Iraq and in Turkey—are what has led to the present situation. The history of the conflict in Syria, about which I have a certain amount of knowledge from 2010 onwards—not least the opportunities missed in 2013, when history might have been different had other things happened—is complex and difficult on all sides. All I can do is assure my hon. Friend that we will do all we can to seek to de-escalate the conflict, protect Kurdish civilians and achieve a resolution.

**Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op):** The Foreign Affairs Committee went to Turkey in January 2017 and had meetings with President Erdoğan and his senior Ministers. It was made very clear to us that Turkey intended at some point to relocate hundreds of thousands of the 3 million Syrian Arab refugees who were in Turkey, into the areas on its border in the north and to prevent the Kurds from having a contiguous area under their control. Why did the international community not do more to stop that, and is the Minister really serious when he thinks that there will be a political solution and that Daesh will be defeated when Turkey sees its priority as stopping the Kurds rather than getting a political solution?

**Alistair Burt:** I am not sure that I know the answer to the hon. Gentleman’s very good question based on his knowledge of the area. As I said a moment ago, the different aspects of this conflict, and the different reasons that some states are taking action, go back many years and are intended to sort out many difficulties and issues brought to light by the conflict against Daesh and the break-up of Syria. It is not possible for the United Kingdom to say to other states what the end lines drawn on the map will be. Countries have concerns about terrorist activity. Turkey has been clear about that in relation to the PKK—a proscribed organisation both there and here—and we respect that in a NATO ally. However, as I have said in relation to what is happening in Afrin, we have been clear with our determination that there should be a de-escalation. And yes, we do call for a resumption of the negotiations between Turkey and the PKK—they only ended in 2015—to see whether there is a chance to bring that together. Perhaps the situation is not quite as hopeless as we sometimes feel when we look at the map.

**Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** I welcome the tone and content of the Minister’s statement, but it is depressing to be back in the House talking about yet more horrors in a country that has seen more than its fair share of them over the past seven years of this conflict. Can he reassure me on what efforts the UK will take to protect civilians if there is a protracted Turkish siege of Afrin?

**Alistair Burt:** We have consistently raised the need to protect civilians and to de-escalate the operation. We want to see the safe, unimpeded and sustained delivery of humanitarian aid and services that are urgently needed across the region and in Syria as a whole. We will continue to press for that. My hon. Friend can be assured that, although we cannot predict the outcome, he can be absolutely certain of the efforts we will make to try to de-escalate the situation and to have a humanitarian situation that protects civilians and hopefully sees them safer.

**Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP):** I have several hundred constituents who hail from this part of the world, many of whom tonight are fearful for their loved ones in the city of Afrin. I have to tell the Minister that they expressed to me an increasing sense of betrayal that this Government and their allies are happy to welcome, indeed praise, the sacrifice of the Kurdish people in the fight against international terrorism, yet when it comes to upholding their political rights they are met with silence. Is it not the truth that the time has come to stop the pretence that the Turkish invasion of Afrin has anything to do with protecting Turkish territorial sovereignty and to admit that it is all about degrading the aspirations of the Kurds in any political settlement that will one day follow the end of this conflict?

**Alistair Burt:** The hon. Gentleman puts his own case and I recognise that. It is not the view of the United Kingdom Government. We recognise the territorial concerns of Turkey, but equally we have been very clear on the humanitarian impact of the conflict and on the opportunity to find a political resolution to the issues that have beset the area for too long. That solution will not come about through conflict; it will come about through political dialogue, which is of course made more difficult by the circumstances. That is why the United Kingdom continues to urge de-escalation, humanitarian access and relief for the families of the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, about whom he speaks so eloquently.

**Michelle Donelan (Chippingham) (Con):** The Turkish Government have assured the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that they are working to prevent civilian casualties,
but reports show that they are actually increasing. Can the Minister confirm how the UK will ensure that civilians are protected from a Turkish siege of Afrin city?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, but the honest answer to her question is that I cannot ensure it and the United Kingdom Government cannot ensure it. That would be to suggest something that we just do not possess and it seems inappropriate for me to do so. All I can say is, along with others in the international community, we will continue to make the representations we can. We moved for a ceasefire in Syria in general, UN resolution 2401, which the Secretary-General spoke about just a few days ago. We worry that these norms are not adhered to. In the immensely complex situation of northern Syria—its Turkish border, what has been experienced in Turkey over the years and the long-standing conflict—the United Kingdom Government can give an assurance on none of this. All we can say is that we are very clear that humanitarian considerations must come first. There must be humanitarian access. The best way to deal with almost any of the conflicts that have arisen in the area is through political dialogue, not the escalation of conflict that will lead only to the resurgence of conflict as soon as this one is over.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is right to urge restraint from Turkey and other partners in the region. What is the Government’s assessment of the Foreign Affairs Committee’s conclusion on the link between the PKK and the YPG, which is central to understanding what is driving Turkey? Does he share my fear that in Afrin and other areas of Syria there may be a long period where the protection of civilians is under threat while we try to get a political settlement and decent governance across areas that are war-torn at present?

Alistair Burt: Once again, the hon. Gentleman speaks with great knowledge of the area. He asks two particular questions. As I said in evidence to the Select Committee, the United Kingdom recognises some similarities in terms of ideology between the PKK and the YPG, but not the direct link that is claimed by Turkey. That is why we proscribe the PKK, but not the YPG. We are aware of the issues of similarity in origin of ideology and what people claim, but we do not see the link in the same way. But his second point regarding the long-term nature of this is entirely real. The longer the conflict as a whole goes on, the more there will be the opportunity for issues of long standing to be settled with the disruption that is currently taking place in Syria. That is why the best opportunity for peace and security all around is to support the Geneva process, as we are, and to work as hard as we are diplomatically to get the parties to find a better answer to the conflict. As the region amply shows, the only certainty in the region is that, if arms are taken up by one group against another, sooner or later the other group will take up arms against the other as well.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I thank the Minister for his statement and for the eloquence of his answers, which reflect the view of so many Members: desperate sympathy for the Kurds, who have been fighting Daesh and Islamic jihad for years—frankly, often on our behalf—and the sense of helplessness we all feel about what is happening in Afrin. My question is on the considerable investment, money and humanitarian aid the United Kingdom has put into the area. Are there any specific additional elements of humanitarian aid that he feels the Government could perhaps provide to help the people who are suffering in Afrin?

Alistair Burt: At the moment, no. I think the honest answer is that I cannot see anything that we could currently add that would make a significant difference beyond what we are already seeking to do. I have been quite clear that we need to make preparations to ensure that when there is access, or when civilians leave the area, there are the food, water and medical supplies that people need. We are consistent in supporting UN resolution 2401 to seek access and the de-escalation of conflict to allow opportunities to be created both for dialogue and to protect the people. If there was anything new that we could think of to add to it we would, but meanwhile we are working with all the partners we can to seek to de-escalate and get the humanitarian access that is crucial.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): We should all be appalled by the scenes affecting civilians in eastern Ghouta and Afrin, but our ability to influence the operational military tactics of Daesh, Assad or Russia in those situations is very limited. However, Turkey is a member of NATO. Can the Minister say whether there has been direct contact between the Defence Secretary and his counterpart in Turkey and, indeed, military-level—officer-level—contact about conduct, tactics and the importance of Turkey adhering to international humanitarian law?

Alistair Burt: In answer to the hon. Gentleman’s good questions, I cannot speak for Defence Secretaries or Defence Ministers. I can say that there has indeed been military contact but not to the extent that he is saying, because it was almost a question about tactics and everything, and that would not be in any way appropriate. The approaches of defence, ambassadors, Prime Ministers and Foreign Secretaries have been consistent on the de-escalation of the conflict and the need for humanitarian access. That is the approach, but as a NATO partner, other partners are involved as well. The United States has a significant interest in the area and in the conflict coming to an end as soon as possible.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): As has already been mentioned by Members on both sides of the House, the Kurds have been key allies in our fight against Daesh. Just in the interests of clarity, do the Government consider Turkey’s continued attacks on Afrin as contravening UN Security Council resolution 2401? If so, does the Minister not agree that condemning them in the strongest possible terms is not only the right thing to do but crucial if we are to restore faith in the international order and any hope of bringing about a political resolution of the crisis?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman puts his question very well and goes to the heart of it. If resolution 2401 is to mean what it says, it is a ceasefire for the whole of Syria. The United Kingdom was part of that and it stands by it. As I said earlier, what happens with resolutions now is that, if there is not sufficient will on the ground, we do not get where we need to be and the international
order is affected. That is one reason why we are so consistent in talking to our Turkish partner about de-escalation, the need for de-escalation and the need for humanitarian access and in urging all parties in the area to try to find a way beyond the conflict.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Last weekend, a Kurdish constituent dissolved in tears at a local meeting about something else—she was very worried about her family. What can we do to take evidence so that, in future, war crimes can be prosecuted in an international court of justice?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady goes further than I can on this issue. Any war crimes allegations have to be brought to the appropriate authorities. The United Kingdom has worked extremely hard over the past few years to provide the opportunity for those in Syria to collect evidence of crimes, wherever they may be. Again, one can understand her constituent, but throughout that area, there are families in tears over each border about an atrocity committed. This is the tragedy for the United Kingdom as it tries to work with others to bring an end to this and to the violence that begets violence. Only by dealing with this in the manner suggested by the UN Secretary-General will we get an end to it. Individual aspects of justice and accountability are crucially important—absolutely—but we will work for a resolution to the conflict as a whole, which we think is the right thing to do, both for the Kurdish communities in the area and those who feel threatened by terror.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Minister will be aware that there is a Kurdish community in my constituency, too, as we have discussed this in the recent past. The Kurdish community in Glasgow has a mixture of sadness and anger about the events that are going on in Afrin. Given that the city of Afrin is under siege, with no water and electricity, can I invite him to join Members on both sides of the House in condemning the invasion, which is resulting in hundreds of civilian deaths and more mass displacement in the entire region?

Alistair Burt: What I can do is make reference to what I said earlier about the return of tactics of siege and ignoring humanitarian norms and international humanitarian law. Conflict is a desperately retrograde step that all communities in the region will suffer from the longer it goes on. That is why the United Kingdom calls unequivocally for a de-escalation in this conflict, humanitarian access and the negotiations and dialogue that are the only thing that ultimately will end the conflict throughout the region.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The Minister said that the Government intend to hold the Turkish Government to account for the representations they have given about preventing civilian casualties. Can I press him on the specific steps that the Government will take to do that? Will they press for independent monitoring and an investigation of any alleged breaches of international law?

Alistair Burt: On holding people to account, the United Kingdom would hold to account any party that is guilty of any crimes in a conflict in the same way, through international structures and organisations. Monitoring on the ground is exceptionally difficult. We must be entirely practical about this. The holding to account is the same holding to account of any party in a conflict. We have been very clear, as I said. We understand the origins of this and why Turkey has the concerns that it does; but equally, we recognise the risk of the conflict diverting attention from the regime and from Daesh. There is already evidence that, as the conflict in Afrin has grown, others elsewhere are taking the opportunity to start up their operations again, which is just further misery for the people of Syria. I again go back to the Secretary-General and his determination, through Staffan de Mistura, to try to find an overall settlement because, ultimately, that is the only thing that will end the conflict between the parties and the pain that is undoubtedly being suffered tonight in areas of that region.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that Turkey’s assault on Afrin was entirely unjustified and had no basis in international law? If he does, what specific steps will the Government take to ensure that Turkey is held accountable for the war crimes being perpetrated in Afrin?

Alistair Burt: I think that I set out what the UK thought of the origins of this at the beginning of my statement, and it does not entirely align with what the hon. Gentleman has said. He has spoken for himself rather than the Government on this occasion.
Points of Order

8.35 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your advice. One year ago today exactly, on 12 March 2017, the Foreign Affairs Select Committee published its ninth report, “Article 50 negotiations: Implications of ‘no deal’”. We also published several other reports last March, on Turkey and Russia, and our second report on political Islam, responses to which were received from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 20 July and published as soon as the Committee was re-established in September. We have received no response to the report on the implications of no deal.

I raised the matter with the Foreign Secretary when he came before our Committee on 1 November and reminded him that the Committee had not yet received the customary response within two months. He said:

“I think you are asking the wrong Department. I think it is DExEU that is drafting the response to your excellent report.”

I asked whether he had seen any draft, and he said:

“No not that I am aware of.”

Then he promised:

“I will make sure we take it up with DExEU”,

and I said: “It is eight months.” He said:

“Thank you, I will make sure that we take it up.”

To date, despite expecting a response, the Committee has not received one from the Department for Exiting the European Union or the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—one year after the report’s publication. Madam Deputy Speaker, can you suggest any course of action that can be taken? I am speaking on behalf of the Deputy Speaker, can you suggest any course of action that can be taken? I am speaking on behalf of the Committee at the request of our Chair. What can we do to get the basic courtesy of a response from the Government on a matter of topical and vital interest to our country and our Parliament? How can we get the Government to respond, as they are supposed to do, to a Select Committee report?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Member for giving me notice of his intention to raise this issue on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Committee. It is certainly unsatisfactory that the Government have not replied to the Committee’s report, if indeed it was published a year ago. It is understandable that there is sometimes a delay during an election period—it should normally be two months—but clearly a delay of a year is something quite different. On what he can do about it, I hope that his concern has been noted on the Treasury Bench and that the Departments involved will now get together and resolve the issue, so that the Committee can have a response as soon as possible.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek you advice. Earlier in the statement, the International Trade Secretary referred to my colleagues in the Labour party and the Scottish National party as being completely opposed to a Trade Bill. He is a doctor but perhaps he has not done his homework on this occasion. My colleagues in the Labour party and we in the Scottish National party tabled a number of amendments to improve the Trade Remedies Authority, its process and the way in which it was due to operate, none of which were taken on board or accepted by the Government. What can I do to ensure that the Secretary of State comes back to the House and sets the record straight?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Lady has made very clear what she feels about the remarks that were made. The Bill will return to the House, and I suggest that she continue to express her view then. I am sure that she will do so and that the Labour Front-Bench team will do so as well.

FINANCIAL GUIDANCE AND CLAIMS BILL [LORDS]

Bill to be considered tomorrow;

Business Without Debate

PETITIONS

Ordered,

That Susan Elan Jones be discharged from the Petitions Committee and Daniel Zeichner be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

PETITION

Accessibility in Chinley Station

8.41 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I rise to present a petition to improve access at Chinley station. It has been signed by more than 800 local people and rail users, thanks to the Chinley and Buxworth transport group.

Chinley is a key station on the Manchester-Sheffield line that is used by thousands of commuters but is also required by ill and disabled people to attend hospital appointments. As there is a regional centre of excellence for disabled children and adults, the station is greatly needed, but the platform can be accessed only via a steep metal footbridge on which injuries regularly occur.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Chinley station on the mainline between Manchester Piccadilly and Sheffield is inaccessible as the only access to the platforms are via steep steps; further that Chinley station is situated at the heart of a growing commuter village which acts as the gateway to the Peak District; and further that members of the Chinley and Buxworth Transport Group have continued to campaign for further improvements, as transport should be accessible for everyone.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Transport to make improvements to Chinley station so that the public can have level access to the railway at Chinley.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]
Respite Care for Vulnerable Adults: Teesside

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Mims Davies.)

8.42 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight an issue which is specific to Teesside, but which I am sure will have parallels throughout the country. Let me start with a well-worn quotation:

“If you’re one of those families, if you’re just managing, I want to address you directly. I know you’re working around the clock, I know you’re doing your best, and I know that sometimes life can be a struggle.”

Ministers are probably fed up with Opposition MPs quoting those words spoken by the Prime Minister just 20 months ago, on the steps of Downing Street. We keep mentioning them in many different contexts while we see our communities suffer as the promise that followed fails to meet their needs.

Parents of some of the most vulnerable people in our community believe that there is a respite care crisis in Teesside. No one works harder around the clock, doing their best and struggling to cope and care, than the parents and siblings of vulnerable adults, some of whom have the most complex needs imaginable. Those vulnerable adults, with some of the most extreme personal needs, may be in their 30s, 40s or even 50s, which means that the parents caring for them are in their 50s, 60s or 70s. We as a society owe those parents and carers a huge debt of gratitude. They choose to care for their loved ones at home. They do not hand them over to the state because they cannot cope; they get on with the job. They endure the sleepless nights, they clean up after their family members, and they give them the love and dedication that they need. To be honest, they do not ask for much in return for the huge burden they shoulder on behalf of us all, yet we often let them down by failing to provide the support they need, and on Teesside that appears to many to be getting worse instead of better.

I know that this issue is not exclusive to Teesside, but this evening I want to speak on behalf of the parent carers whose loved ones use the residential provision at Bankfields and Aysgarth on Teesside, and all those families who rely on residential respite care to give them a break from caring and have just a little bit of time for themselves.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate; we have almost an hour and fifteen minutes to speak on the subject, which will be nice. One in 10 people in Northern Ireland are carers, and what the hon. Gentleman is describing is happening in Northern Ireland as well. Does he agree that short-term respite care must be provided to assist in securing the long-term benefit of keeping people in their homes and semi-independent, and that respite care should be offered, and should not have to be begged for?

Alex Cunningham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I agree with him: the longer people are supported to stay at home, the longer they are not an even greater financial burden on the state. I will develop that theme later.

Such is the crisis in health and social care in our country that our NHS commissioners face difficult choices, and families are very worried that they could be facing a substantial cut in the provision offered to them as the local clinical commissioning groups seek to stretch the limited resources they have to meet an increase in demand for support. The CCG for north Tees and Hartlepool and the South Tees CCG are reorganising the way they provide residential respite care. When I met the north Tees chief executive on Friday, she told me of the need to have needs-based services and the plan to review exactly what each individual needs. I know, and so does the Minister, that we must have equity in the system and meet the needs of each individual, and I do not have a problem with that, but, sadly, the review is being interpreted by the families as a cut in provision, with some believing they could lose up to half their respite nights, which they are very anxious about.

I definitely agree that provision should be right to meet the needs of the individual, but this issue is much greater than that: it is also about the needs of the whole family, and perhaps the CCG should have conducted a needs assessment before deciding on the review. In fact, I have always thought that the respite care was very much for the family—an opportunity to take a break from their caring responsibilities, to recharge the batteries and to prepare to resume what they see as their duties.

The CCG has been at pains to stress to me that its proposals do not necessarily mean that there will be a huge reduction in the number of respite nights, but it recognises things will change for some people and is working with families and piloting different ideas to try and improve provision and reassure them. While I think the CCG could have handled this whole business better and understood more comprehensively the issues from the perspective of the families and the various local authority and joint health scrutiny groups who oppose the plans, I cannot say it is its fault.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): In my constituency, a home providing respite care for very disabled and unwell children called the Manor is being closed, and I very much agree with my hon. Friend that this issue should be about the whole child, including the family, and the respite having that night provision gives to the family. In my constituency, that night provision is being entirely cancelled; does my hon. Friend agree that this issue is a terrible cut and that the CCG should have conducted a needs assessment?

Alex Cunningham: I certainly do agree. I opened my speech by talking specifically about this being not just a Teesside issue, but an issue across the country, and it is a tremendous challenge to Government to plan for the future; I will also be developing that later in my speech.

I know that the team members at the CCG dealing with respite and wider provision are dedicated to their jobs and that they too have been distressed as we have gone through this process, and I for one appreciate the strains of dealing with such sensitive issues. They are trying to do their best within what they say are the ring-fenced resources available, although I personally could have hoped that they would have kicked the Government for failing to provide the resources needed.

Currently, respite is provided in two NHS centres of excellence, Aysgarth and Bankfields, but what are they planning to do now? The best of the options available
to carers is this perceived reduction in residential care provided by the expert and nursing staff for their family members, and then the provision of a menu of alternative choices, largely without nurses. The choices include beds in care homes, hotel rooms, adapted caravans and even in carers’ own homes. Could we really see a vulnerable adult accommodated in a caravan somewhere and looked after by people in whom their parents may struggle to have confidence? What about the risk assessments for that menu of provision? Who is going to check that all the new people caring for these vulnerable people are both trained and suitable for this role and that the premises are suitable? What respite is it for a carer if they have the respite worker under their own roof? That is not much of a break for the carer or the family member.

To be fair to the CCG, it has promised that there will always be appropriately trained staff to offer the care and support required. Sadly, however, it is yet to provide the families with the reassurance they need, and the uncertainty is torture for them. So much more needs to be done to drive understanding. We also have to ask whether changes that cause such disruption are really appropriate in 21st-century Britain when carers do not know what the future holds. Our provision should be improving, not deteriorating in practical terms nor in the eyes of the carers.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does he agree that this country needs to be doing a great deal more to support carers? I think back to the 1997 Labour Government, when national insurance contributions towards carers’ pensions were introduced. Is there not a Government, when national insurance contributions to carers? I think back to the 1997 Labour Government, when national insurance contributions towards carers’ pensions were introduced. Is there not a Government when national insurance contributions towards carers’ pensions were introduced.

Alex Cunningham: I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group on carers, so I spend a bit of time on this subject. I do not know whether we will ever get to a point at which we are content that we have done enough, but we need to do much more.

I recently wrote to the Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees CCG regarding the consultation that was taking place at the time. It confirmed that it is committed to retaining the full £1.5 million fund for this provision, but it highlighted that the money will have to be spread further to reach more families. That confirms that provision is being diluted, and when provision is diluted, it is cut, and it will be the carers who will pick up the extra responsibility.

I accept the CCG’s point that more people need respite services, but the answer is surely to increase funding and provide the services that are needed, not water down what is available and provide a poorer-quality service. Demands for such services will continue to increase over the coming years as more vulnerable, high-needs young people grow into adults, live longer and need the kind of comprehensive support given by the people I have been speaking of today. The cost of meeting the services will therefore go up and, yes, although the cost may in some cases be shared between the NHS and local authorities, neither of them can sustain quality services for a growing cohort of people when the income simply is not there.

According to the National Audit Office, Stockton Council has had its budget cut by 52% since 2010 and spends around 57% of its money on social care. Does the Minister realise that we are facing a potential crisis? Does she understand the tremendous role that carers take on? Does she appreciate the need for comprehensive respite care to give them a few days’ break, or does she think that they will get by and manage? Well, while some may, others will not and will face the difficult decision to hand their loved one over to the health service full time because they simply cannot cope any more. What short, mid and long-term planning are Government doing to ensure that we have a strategy in place not just in Teesside but across the country to cope with increased demand and provide the increased resources required to deliver appropriate provision?

My colleagues on Teesside—my hon. Friends the Members for Stockton South (Dr Williams), for Hartlepool (Mike Hill), for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and for Redcar (Anna Turley)—have all listened to carers’ stories and recognise that they are facing tremendous anxiety over what the changes will mean to respite care. Others have listened, too, including the scrutiny committees of our local authorities. The joint health scrutiny committee, a cross-committee of local councillors, stated that it could not endorse either of the two options or any other that would reduce provision. None of the councillors believe that the CCG has covered itself in glory in its handling of the matter, and they can see why those dependent on these services for a decent quality of life have lost all trust in the organisation, feeling that it has ignored their pleas and failed to understand their needs.

There is another dimension to this. I applaud the CCG for the comprehensive consultation exercise—and it has been comprehensive. Sadly, the CCG has failed to get its messages of reassurance across to these needy families, who interpret that as its having failed to recognise the anxieties created by the process. Carers tell me they have no understanding of any new criteria that will determine who gets what services. They feel that they are being left in the dark. Yes, I praise the public consultation by the CCG, but at the end of day the options were severely limited. I repeat that there is no extra cash to cope with increased demand.

I have heard that at one meeting with councillors, the CCG said that carers cheered when option 2 was chosen over option 1, which would have ended all provision at the two nurse-led residential units. Naturally, the carers cheered the better of two bad options. There was no option at all to extend the current provision or provide resources to cater for the additional needs of new adults coming into the system, which is something that Ministers need to reflect on. The CCG also stated that this was not a cost-cutting exercise. I know that the money is ring-fenced, but with the need to look after more people with the same money, there are fewer resources per person in the system. While I remain critical of the CCG and the way in which it has handled this issue I recognise that in many ways it has been backed into a corner. It know the demands on its service, but does the Minister? It knows that there are more people needing services, but there is no additional funding to provide that.

We all know that we have a health and social care crisis in our country, and while local authorities can shift the burden on to local council tax payers as Government cuts bite deeper; it is not something that our local NHS commissioners can do. They cannot tell local tax payers that they are sticking an extra 3% on their bills to try and alleviate the shortage of funds in
areas such as respite care. That leaves the buck well and truly in the Chamber, with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Minister. My plea to her is simple. Will she take an interest in what is happening on Teesside with respite care for vulnerable adults? Will she examine the proposals, which parents see as a cut to provision for families in the area?

This is much bigger than Teesside. Yes, I know that there are CCGs up and down the country facing the same issues, so perhaps it is time for Ministers to consider the whole policy area of supporting carers such as those I have talked about this evening and find ways of providing the NHS and, for that matter, local authorities with the resources that are needed. Will the Minister instigate a much-needed policy review to see how we can do much better as a country to support carers?

Many families—I have talked to several—are living on the edge, struggling to cope with the needs of their loved ones. They have no intention whatsoever of handing them over to the state, but they need comprehensive respite care services to give them a little of their own time and space. We as a nation owe them no less.

8.58 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North [Alex Cunningham] on securing the debate. I also congratulate him on his leadership in this area and on his engagement with the families and the clinical commissioning groups.

The challenge of being a carer for an adult with complex needs is a lifelong challenge. I have enormous respect and admiration for the people who do this work. My grandmother’s sister—I have just worked out that she is my great-aunt—has spent her life looking after several different adults with complex needs. She adopted them as children and has cared for them. I have seen the enormous amount of love and compassion that she has given them, and I have seen in all my constituents who have contacted me, and in my work as a GP in my constituency, the love and compassion that go into looking after adults with complex needs. But this comes at a cost for carers, mainly to their health. They often prioritise the needs of the person they are caring for and do not think about preventing their own ill health problems or about properly looking after problems as they arise. There is also a time cost. Being a carer for an adult with complex needs is a massive time commitment, a money cost and a career cost. So there is huge cost.

Jim Shannon: It is also important to get the issue of young carers recorded in Hansard. I have a vibrant young carers association in my constituency, in Regent Street, Newtonards. The work they do with elderly family members is the reason those families are together, so the issue of young carers is so important. Does the hon. Gentleman encounter the same issues I have in my area when it comes to young carers? Does he agree on the importance of keeping families together and of what young carers do?

Dr Williams: I thank the hon. Gentleman for highlighting the needs of young carers. In my constituency, as in those of all Members in this House, there are young people who grow up suddenly when they find themselves needing to be carers and who really do hold families together.

In the context of how difficult this caring can be and the tremendous efforts that people make in order to keep their loved ones well and look after them, the provision of occasional respite is the least we should be doing as a society. It is the least we should be doing to say thank you and to sustain the incredible efforts that these people are making. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North, I give some credit to the two CCGs involved, Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees CCG, and South Tees CCG, for taking some responsibility for this. We all see the constant jostling between local authorities and commissioners of health services about who should fund these issues in a time of austerity, but our CCGs have stepped up to the plate and taken ongoing responsibility for funding these issues.

However, a number of constituents have contacted me in what I can only describe as a state of panic during these consultations and since the outcome of the consultations was announced. They are fearful that their much-needed breaks are going to be taken away from them. As my hon. Friend pointed out, their fears may well prove to be ill-founded, but this should not mean that they should be discounted. Change is always difficult for people, but the possibility of services being cut has caused genuine anxiety for these people and we should rightly be recognising it. We all know that caring can be physically demanding, but it can also be mentally demanding, especially if it is being done for long periods of time. Adequate respite is essential if these carers are to be able to maintain their own health and well-being. It is also essential that carers are closely involved in any decisions about what is adequate and appropriate for their family members and for themselves. As he has said, a respite package should be designed around the needs of the whole family, not just those of the individual with complex needs.

What we are seeing, though, is limited funding. I do not know whether this is ring-fenced funding that the CCG has or whether it is taken from an overall pot, but there is limited funding. CCGs have a number of conflicting priorities. We know that throughout the health service demand is increasing and outstripping any increase in resource that it has. The limited funding and the rising need for this particular kind of care mean that for some people packages of care are likely to be reduced. That is causing people significant anxiety.

Before I finish, let me say that our experience on Teesside illustrates that health and social care do not exist in isolation from each other. Some small steps have been taken, including by changing the Department of Health’s name to the Department of Health and Social Care, but respite care is a really good example of where some more concrete steps can be taken to bring together health and social care funding. There should be a partnership between local authorities, clinical commissioning groups, parents, carers and the people with complex needs, so that they can work together. Respite care is an issue on which we should be seeing integration at its best. If we are talking about integration, I have to take the opportunity to talk about the forthcoming Green Paper on social care. It is inconceivable for me that in 2018 we should be considering social care in isolation. Will the Department think
about whether the Green Paper should really be on health and social care together, rather than just on social care?

I pay tribute again to the carers who have come together to fight for the very best services for their loved ones. They deserve for us to listen, to consider and to act, so that they get the respite services that they need for themselves and their families.

9.6 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I wholeheartedly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing this debate, which is crucial to some of the most vulnerable people who face the most difficult challenges in their lives. All too often, their voices are not heard in this place, so this debate is extremely important and I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for securing it and for enabling our discussion of this issue.

I was keen to speak in this debate because, at the very first surgery that I held after I was elected three years ago, the very first people who came to see me were the carers of a disabled adult with severe needs. I was shocked to hear that they had not come to discuss their concerns about themselves, or even about the quality of care—although of course they were concerned about the quality of care for their adopted daughter—but were mostly concerned about the wellbeing of the staff and carers who looked after their daughter, and about the lack of payment for overnight working, the low pay and the insecure nature of the work. As we look ahead to the Green Paper on social care, I wish to take the opportunity to underline on the Floor of the House how fundamental those who work in the sector are to the care that these vulnerable families need. If we do not look after them, we cannot expect the families to get the kind of care that they deserve.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a point about young carers, the voices of whom all too often just are not heard. There is a fantastic charity in Redcar called the Junction Foundation. It is my charity of the year and does an amazing job of supporting young people who are trying to manage the care of members of their families and who are, in a sense, losing some of their childhood in doing so. I do not know what would happen if charities such as the Junction Foundation were not there, because these are people who are falling through the cracks in state provision. I pay tribute to all the charities and state organisations out there that support young people.

I wish to focus briefly on what respite care means to some of the people in my constituency. Facilities such as Bankfields Court in Eston in my constituency are hugely beneficial to the quality of life for the people with learning disabilities and other complex needs who directly access their support. They are also a valuable lifeline to family members who work 24/7 caring for their loved ones. It is difficult for any of us to imagine what it would be like to have to care for a family member 24/7 who has very high levels of need and to have to work through incredibly complex care packages and care plans, often for years—even decades—to support the family member. They do that out of love. We pay tribute to them and owe it to them to make sure that state provision supports them.

The feedback from the “Transforming care” consultation was very worrying. There is overwhelming support for the continuation of bed-based respite care. In fact, 96% of consultees in my own borough of Redcar and Cleveland backed that option by 96%, so it is overwhelmingly clear that people want to make sure that bed-based respite care continues to be available.

One constituent who contacted me about the proposals is extremely concerned about the support available for her 50-year-old son who has been attending Bankfields Court for the past 30 years. He requires nursing care and she is concerned about how he will cope if the service provided to support him is cut. The reliability and consistency of care provided by centres such as these is one of the most important reasons that they are preferred so much by disabled people and their families. They are particularly important for individuals for whom routine and structure are a necessity. The biggest issue around this is that the insecurity and disruption have a huge knock-on effect on people’s lives.

The continued availability of bed-based services at Bankfields and Aysgarth is preferable, of course, to none at all, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North said, but the reality is that these services are still going to be cut back. A cap on spending on respite care by the local CCG will inevitably restrict the services on offer. There will either be fewer nights of care or fewer people. That is a choice that we just do not want to be in a position to have to make. However, if someone has a presenting need for care, the CCG will still have to provide it, regardless of the funding restraints. Where will that care be commissioned? Does that then mean that more cuts will be made elsewhere to compensate?

At the heart of this issue is the funding cuts that local NHS services are being forced to make by central Government. Respite care services across the country are seen, I am afraid, as low-hanging fruit by many local NHS trusts and CCGs, which are having to save money. This is a short-term approach, which we know will only cost more in the long run and will have a devastating impact on many of the most vulnerable people in our society.

I was surprised to read about one case in Hertfordshire, where cuts of £600,000 to respite services for children with complex needs have been proposed. The High Court has now ruled against this twice after legal challenges. I understand that, on Teesside, the scrutiny committees for adult services are discussing whether to formally raise the issue with the Secretary of State, and I sincerely hope that they do. That is a sign of how strongly they feel. Respite care is an important part of our social care system, which is already extremely reliant on hundreds of thousands of unpaid family carers across the UK who give up their lives to provide care. Cutting these services will place even more pressure on those trying to do right by their loved ones.

9.11 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for raising his concerns this evening, and indeed to his colleagues, the hon. Members for Stockton South (Dr Williams) and for Redcar (Anna Turley). They have stated the justifiable concerns of their constituents powerfully and articulately. Whenever change is afoot, people have a tendency to feel concerned, and it is absolutely right that those concerns are articulated.
Supporting the most vulnerable in our society—those with complex needs, those with autism and those with learning disabilities—is one of the most important but exacting tasks that health and social care commissioners face. It is a task that must be undertaken with a genuine desire to get the very best outcomes not only for those who need support, but for those who care for them.

It is important to remember that many of the services that we are discussing today are focused on people with autism and learning disabilities—conditions that can manifest with very different requirements. They may need care and help ranging from routine, occasional help in the home to full-time personal support, with perhaps two or more people at a time providing that personal assistance.

Our mandate to NHS England includes a clear objective to improve outcomes for people with autism or learning disabilities. That means making sure that they are fully supported in the community, that hospital admissions are reduced and that they have the opportunity to live an ordinary life. Building the right support is our plan to use concerted local action to deliver that community support and to reduce the number of in-patients by March 2019.

We know that respite services are extremely important and a significant element of community-based support. They benefit not only the individual receiving that care, but their family and carers. Members have spoken very powerfully about that tonight. The hon. Member for Stockton North rightly points out that family carers in particular play an invaluable role—a role that is often unsung and undervalued. Often, they do so not out of a sense of duty or compassion, but out of pure love, and they deserve nothing other than our unbridled respect and our thanks. He asked me about the work that we are doing to support carers. They will of course be an integral part of our thinking in the Government Green Paper on social care that will be produced later in the year. In the interim period, we have a carers’ action plan, which I care passionately about and which will set out some short-term steps that we want to introduce to support carers and their valuable work more fully.

Alex Cunningham: It is very clear that the Minister gets this, and I admire the way in which she is putting her argument across, but this is also about resource. I am very concerned about the current problem on Teesside, but in the longer term young people in their 20s are coming through the system and approaching 30. These are children who in a previous generation would never have survived, and they are going to need more and more services. More children are becoming adults who will require more provision. What are the Government doing in terms of longer-term planning?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman articulates a real issue with which we have to contend. That is why we have increased NHS spending every single year since 2010, so that our NHS now has about £13 billion more to spend on caring for people than it had in 2010. That goes to the heart of the issue that he has identified. We need to ensure that care, particularly respite care, is responsive to the needs of individuals. That implies both a need to assess and determine the right kind of support, and a need for flexibility to allow for personal choice, as I believe is being looked at in Teesside.

Some needs may be best met through a stay in a suitable service that provides overnight beds, with appropriately trained staff to support people’s individual care needs, but that may not be true for everybody. Those with less severe physical or learning disabilities may find that action in the community is more desirable and appropriate for them—for example a visit, leisure activity or even visiting family members with the right personal support. We do not want those opportunities to be written off for them because we have a very restrictive system, which is why it is right that commissioners have the means to seek new approaches and to be flexible in how they meet people’s needs. I understand that the intention in North Tees is exactly that, but it must be based on suitable engagement, as the hon. Gentleman said, to assess people’s individual needs.

Having listened to hon. Members’ comments, I understand their concern that not everyone can currently access respite services and that these services may not be flexible enough. Local commissioners are rightly looking to change respite provision. The hon. Gentleman will understand that it is not customary for a Minister to comment in detail on specific commissioning decisions or on the extent to which there was appropriate consultation, unless that is part of a formal review process. I understand that the local CCG has consulted on the proposals for 10 weeks and is now in the process of designing the service.

Alex Cunningham: Does the Minister recognise that the CCG has acknowledged that it will have to get more people into the system, so the service will be diluted? Having recognised that, what can she do about it?

Caroline Dinenage: As I have already said, it is up to CCGs to commission the local services that they feel are appropriate in their local communities. It is not for the Government to force a top-down diktat on how they need to spend their resources. I understand that local councils are, quite rightly, scrutinising the proposals right now. This is an important means of quality assurance and is informed by local people with local knowledge. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will find some reassurance in that. However, although it is right that service reconfigurations are considered locally and are not driven from the top down, any significant changes to services are subject to the Government’s four tests. The changes should demonstrate support from clinical commissioners, strengthened public and patient engagement, clarity on the clinical evidence base, and support for patient choice.

There is a clear set of expectations in relation to the provision of respite care and the role of commissioners. Alongside provisions in the National Health Service Act 2006, all CCGs must secure services to meet the needs of their population to a reasonable extent. Respite care may be routinely commissioned or made available as part of a package of NHS continuing healthcare, and is often also provided as part of social care. The Care Act 2014 requires that where an adult or carer appears to have care and support needs, the local authority must carry out an assessment and meet any need where the person has met the eligibility criteria.

Alex Cunningham: The scrutiny groups on Teesside—at least some of them—are thinking of referring the matter to the Secretary of State. What happens when it is referred, and what can the Government do then?
Caroline Dinenage: That will of course be a matter for the Secretary of State, who will deal with it in the appropriate way.

The Care Act also requires local authorities to take a preventive approach to addressing people’s needs in taking steps to intervene early to prevent or delay any worsening of an adult’s need for care and support. This would of course include the carers about whom the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues care so passionately. It is really important to allow carers to take the respite that we have spoken about.

The hon. Gentleman might be interested to know that the Autism Act 2009 requires the Government to have a regularly reviewed autism strategy and to issue guidance to local authorities, NHS bodies, and foundation trusts. In addition, the Children and Families Act 2014 introduced a new statutory framework for children with special educational needs and disabilities. This gives commissioners very clear responsibilities towards those with learning disabilities and autism, including those who may be affected by the review on Teesside.

Jim Shannon: I think that everyone in this Chamber will have a knowledge of autism. The Minister will be aware that we have an excellent autism strategy in Northern Ireland, and there is also a very good strategy in Wales. Has she had a chance to check out both those strategies in order perhaps to introduce them, in full, to England?

Caroline Dinenage: I have not, but now that the hon. Gentleman has recommended that to me, I will certainly look into it.

It is really important that commissioners have the prerogative to make a local determination of what constitutes the right services. We have set clear expectations for how health and social care meets people’s need for support and families’ and carers’ needs for respite. We can close the gap between the outcomes for those who are most vulnerable and those without complex needs, but it has to be via a combination of setting national expectations alongside a local approach to delivering the necessary services. The NHS has a responsibility to ensure that people have access to the best and safest healthcare possible. This means that it must plan ahead and look at how best to secure safe and sustainable NHS healthcare provision, and provide flexible approaches to meet the widest range of needs.

That is what we hope to see in action in Teesside. I understand that any change to local services for vulnerable people must be viewed with a degree of apprehension. However, considering the assurances given locally by commissioners, the process they have undertaken, and the overall aim of providing a more flexible set of options for respite care that moves away from a very medical model, I am hopeful that these changes will be of benefit to the people who most need these services.

Question put and agreed to.

9.23 pm

House adjourned.
Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the place of marine energy in the industrial strategy; and if he will make a statement.

The Secretary of State was asked—

**Marine Energy**

1. **Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the place of marine energy in the industrial strategy; and if he will make a statement. [904324]

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark):** My ministerial colleagues and I have regular discussions with our counterparts in the Welsh Government on all aspects of the industrial strategy. Last week, my officials were in Cardiff to discuss with the Welsh Government the proposed Swansea bay tidal lagoon.

**Albert Owen:** At the heart of the industrial strategy is spreading prosperity across the whole of the United Kingdom, and working with devolved Administrations in our nations and regions will help to achieve that. The Welsh Government are working with practical developers—Minesto, an international company, and local company Morlais—to develop marine energy in my part of the world. The Secretary of State mentioned the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. Will he now make a decision and work with the Welsh Government and with developers so that we can roll that out, maximise our potential, and spread prosperity in this part of the United Kingdom?

**Greg Clark:** I share the hon. Lady’s point. I think that everyone recognises these issues. In fact, the First Minister wrote to me yesterday and acknowledged the “genuine challenges in...considering a proposal involving untried technology with high capital costs and significant uncertainties.” That is why the best way to do this is to explore all the possibilities and to recognise the constraints. That is what I have committed to with colleagues in the Welsh Government.

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): I, too, say to the Minister that making a decision on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon is important for Wales as a whole. There is huge potential for future lagoons around Newport following the Swansea pathfinder. It is really important that we do not pass up these opportunities.

**Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that his statistics are based on surveys that are carried out about 10 weeks after installation? My own survey found that 54% of constituents would...
currently refuse a smart meter, 97% want to see the costs of the programme shown on their bills, and 74% said that receiving one had not yet made any difference to the size of their bills. Will he also take those findings into account?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Gentleman knows me well enough to know that I am very interested in anything he has to say. He contributed a lot to the passage of the Smart Meters Bill in the House of Commons. I would be very interested to receive those statistics, but we do receive them from quite a few different places, and I do not just quote one sample.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I am sure the Minister is speaking in good faith, but I have come across constituents who find that bills are not reducing, but increasing. Has he had discussions with the utility companies about keeping an eye on this and making sure that the effect of smart meters is to reduce costs for constituents, many of whom are poor, not raise them?

Richard Harrington: I am very surprised to hear what the hon. Gentleman says. As he said—I am grateful for it—I am talking in good faith; I know he is too. I would be pleased to hear of those examples, but I cannot quite understand why bills would go up, because nearly 90% of people with smart meters say that it is changing their energy patterns and that bills are going down.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Can the Minister update us on where we are with the roll-out of SMETS 2 smart meters?

Richard Harrington: As my hon. Friend, who also contributed a lot to the passage of the Bill, knows, SMETS 2 is the newer type of meter which at the moment is in its trial phase. As the months go on, SMETS 1 meters will be converted through software that is being developed by the Data Communications Company, and all new meters will be SMETS 2.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): How satisfied are consumers when they realise that a smart meter becomes a dumb meter when they switch suppliers? Can he put an accurate timeline on the roll-out of SMETS 2 meters?

Richard Harrington: As I explained, the software that is being developed now and will be in place shortly after the summer will ensure that that does not happen. The comparatively small number of SMETS 1 meters that do not operate as smart meters when suppliers change will suddenly become compliant, and they will all be able to speak to one another electronically, which is what we all want.

Carbon Reduction Targets

3. Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the UK’s ability to meet its carbon reduction targets. [904326]

7. Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the UK’s ability to meet its carbon reduction targets. [904330]
that is why we have set our home efficiency targets at band C for 2035. We are keen to do that in a cost-effective way, and I will shortly be bringing forward the consultation on ECO—energy company obligation—and how to target it at fuel-poor households. In addition, we need to create a route to market for some of our best British technology to solve that problem.

**John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con):** Nuclear power will clearly be central to us reaching our carbon targets. Is the Minister confident that enough progress is being made to see the construction of nuclear plants in Anglesey and Cumbria?

**Claire Perry:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, making these long-term decisions and creating costs for consumers over decades—whether in tidal lagoons or in nuclear—are matters that we have to take extremely seriously. We have to reduce the carbon emissions of our power supply, cut costs for consumers and create innovation that we can export around the world, and all of those considerations are being taken into account.

**Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP):** To meet carbon reduction targets, the Government will need to support, among other technology, offshore wind projects. In Scottish waters, Dounreay Tri, Kincardine and Forthwind are working to deliver first generation projects with an immediate value of £200 million for jobs and the supply chain, yet due to factors outwith their control, they will struggle to hit the UK Government’s October deadline. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we might support these projects in making their contribution to carbon reduction?

**Claire Perry:** We have worked very hard on the wind industry in Scotland—the hon. Gentleman and I both welcome the recent announcement about remote island wind, which is a really positive step forward—but the challenge is that the phasing out of the renewables obligations was set over four years ago. People have been aware of them, and we are currently not intending to extend the length of the grace periods. However, as he knows, I am always happy to try to build cross-party consensus on this vital agenda for this country.

**Dr Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I am sure it is absolutely not the intention of the Minister to mislead the House in any way, but her statements about our being 96% of our way towards meeting our fourth carbon budget need to be put in the context of fifth carbon budgets and the policy proposals. Again, he and I both need to be absolutely clear that regardless—[Interuption.]

**Electric Vehicle Charge Points**

4. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to improve electric vehicle charge point infrastructure.

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy** (Greg Clark): Britain is building one of the best charge point networks in the world, and our £400 million charging infrastructure investment fund, announced at the Budget, will see thousands more charge points installed across the UK.

**Mark Pawsey:** Yesterday, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee visited the London Electric Vehicle Company in my constituency. The Secretary of State will remember opening it a year ago, and it is great that we are now seeing electric taxis on the streets of London. We also went to the Electric Vehicle Experience Centre in Milton Keynes, where we heard concerns about the fact that the lack of compatibility between chargers and connectors is in danger of putting people off buying an electric car. What will the Secretary of State do to encourage the industry to adopt a standard?

**Greg Clark:** I am delighted that the Committee went to see the electric taxi company. The opening, at which my hon. Friend accompanied me, was a fantastic event. Having such compatibility is a very important matter. The recently introduced Alternative Fuels Infrastructure Regulations 2017 set minimum standards for publicly accessible charge points. In addition, the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill, which is currently before Parliament, will give the Government new powers to regulate these technical standards.

**Mark Tami** (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Many supply companies are worried that if there is a high uptake, which I think we would all support, the infrastructure will not be there to support it. It is just not true that electric vehicles do not use a great deal of power, so there are concerns about strain on the system as a whole.

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for those comments. Our access to the network is one of the best in the world, especially for fast chargers. He is absolutely right that electric vehicles can contribute to the electricity grid’s resilience, because their batteries can store electricity generated by renewables for a time when it is needed, which is very much part of the smart systems plan.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Batteries, of course, are one of the constraints that people consider before buying electric cars, because of their limited range. Does my right hon. Friend therefore welcome the initiative of the Mayor of the West Midlands, along with the Government, for introducing a battery research centre in the west midlands?
Greg Clark: Not a Question Time goes by without me welcoming an initiative from the Mayor of the West Midlands. We have worked very closely with the Mayor, and with the automotive industry, to ensure that we are investing at the cutting edge of research into battery technology, precisely so that we can build the cars of the future.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What comfort can the Secretary of State give the people of Bristol, who wish to see the number of electric charging points massively increased?

Greg Clark: I am delighted that there is such enthusiasm in Bristol. The hon. Lady will be aware that the funding for charging infrastructure is available especially for city-centre authorities that can put it into public car parks.

Oil and Gas Industry

5. Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What progress has been made on a sector deal for the oil and gas industry.

Richard Harrington (Strangford) (DUP): What discussions has the Minister had with the Treasury about the impact of procedure changes on the gas and oil industry?

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. The oil and gas industry based in the north-east of Scotland has contributed over £330 billion to the economy, supports over 330,000 jobs across the United Kingdom and has a supply chain worth nearly £30 billion. With an estimated 20 million barrels of oil still to get out of the North sea, the industry has huge potential to drive this country’s growth, but of course there is still uncertainty, so I know that the Minister will welcome the response—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but we need a single-sentence question, not a preamble.

Andrew Bowie: Will the Minister pledge to work continually with the industry to develop and deliver the sector deal?

Richard Harrington: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What discussions has the Minister had with the Treasury about the impact of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs’ new end-use procedure changes on the gas and oil industry?

Richard Harrington: I will give a very succinct answer, as you have requested, Mr Speaker. I do not know, but I will happily meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss it.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What consideration is my hon. Friend giving to the downstream sector? Our remaining oil refineries are important national assets and major centres of employment, and they could benefit from clear, long-term thinking.

Richard Harrington: As my right hon. Friend will be aware, the whole sector is important to us, and specifically the supply chain. I have met various players involved, and it is of critical importance to us.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The UK Government have so far failed to announce a sector deal for oil and gas, and there was no mention of one in their industrial strategy. There is a need for a sector deal approach to the industry. The Scottish Government have been calling for such action. Will the Minister finally rectify this glaring omission and commit that vital support for the industry and the jobs and investment it relies on?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Gentleman should be aware that this is a priority for us. We are working very hard with the sector to come up with a sector deal, and I expect those talks to come to fruition very soon.

Electric and Autonomous Vehicles

6. Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the development of electric and autonomous vehicles.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The automotive sector deal will ensure that the UK continues to reap the benefits from leading the transition to zero-emission and autonomous vehicles. Last month that drew in £33 million of investment into the UK-based connected and autonomous vehicle programmes, with participation from across the industry.

Mr Jayawardena: Jaguar Land Rover recently developed the I-Pace, its first all-electric performance SUV, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) mentioned, the London Electric Vehicle Company has developed the world’s first purpose-built electric taxi. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating those great British manufacturers on the world-leading role they are playing in the sector?

Greg Clark: I certainly will. The Jaguar and the London taxi are iconic images, and to see them leading the way into the future is a matter of great delight. I congratulate both companies on choosing to manufacture those vehicles in the UK.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What is the Secretary of State doing to help development in the transition from diesel to electric vehicles? In particular, how is he helping with infrastructure?

Greg Clark: We are working very closely with the industry to ensure that as it develops the new technologies of the future, it is able to plan a smooth transition to a world in which all vehicles will be compatible with our climate objectives.
Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): All the new electric vehicles will need batteries, of which lithium is an essential element. Recent discoveries of large deposits of lithium in Cornwall open up the possibility of the UK securing a domestic supply for this vital element. What support can the Secretary of State give to this exciting new emerging sector?

Greg Clark: Through our industrial strategy, we have highlighted the potential for new developments in battery storage. If Cornwall can supply the lithium to power that new industry then I am delighted to hear it. I will discuss the possibilities further with my hon. Friend.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): At yesterday’s Select Committee visit, mentioned by the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), it became very apparent that the market for electric vehicles is maturing at a much faster rate than many people realise. Is it possible that the ambition for electric vehicles is maturing at a much faster rate than many people realise. Is it possible that the ambition of the sector itself is outstripping the ambition of the Government, and should the 2040 target be brought forward, perhaps even by a decade?

Greg Clark: When it comes to the new generation of automotive technology, the ambition of this Government is not outstripped by anyone. We are working very closely—hand in glove—with the industry, through the Automotive Council, to make sure that we are the best placed in the world not only to research the new technologies, but to manufacture them in this country.

Automotive Sector

9. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What financial support his Department makes available for manufacturers in the automotive sector. [904332]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Government’s long-term partnership with the automotive industry is an exemplar of our industrial strategy. Only a fortnight ago, I went to Derbyshire to welcome Toyota’s decision to build the new Auris in Burnaston, helping to secure 3,000 jobs between Burnaston and Deeside in north Wales.

Justin Madders: I am sure that, while welcoming that investment, the Secretary of State will have been alarmed by the comments made by the chief executive of the PSA Group, which owns Vauxhall in my constituency, about the lack of certainty, with Brexit affecting investment decisions. Will the Secretary of State meet the PSA Group and me to give us confidence in terms of investment in the future of that plant?

Greg Clark: I regularly meet with chief executives of car companies, including Mr Tavares. It is very clear that we are determined, as the Prime Minister set out in her Mansion House speech, to make sure that this very important integrated supply chain is able to continue to operate. It is worth bearing in mind that since my team have been in the Department every single major new model decision has gone our way. I am determined to keep up that advocacy.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): The automotive sector is crucial to UK industry. It employs 814,000 people and we are all proud of British car manufacturers, including the iconic Rolls-Royce and Jaguar. In recent weeks, however, President Trump has revealed an appetite for a trade war that began with the announcement of steel tariffs and now includes threats to put tariffs on EU cars, which could hit our industry hard. Will the Secretary of State tell this House what he is doing to avoid a trade war with the US? Should such tariffs come into play, what will he do to protect our steel and automotive sector?

Greg Clark: I am sure the hon. Lady was in her place yesterday when the Trade Secretary gave a very comprehensive statement. There was some welcome for the cross-party approach that went into defending the international system of free trade. It does no one any good if we have tariffs in place that impede trade. Her endorsement of the approach being taken by the Trade Secretary would be welcome.

Carillion

10. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Whether he is taking steps to safeguard the employment of people who were working under private sector Carillion contracts at the time of that company’s liquidation. [904333]

19. Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps he has taken to support and engage with businesses affected by the liquidation of Carillion. [904342]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): The official receiver and special manager are working to ensure an orderly transition by facilitating the transfer of contracts. As of 12 March, 8,521 jobs have been safeguarded and 1,536 people have been made redundant, sadly, through the liquidation. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary has set up a taskforce, bringing together trade associations, bankers and representatives of Government to ensure that we support the Carillion supply chain. The taskforce has delivered a range of supportive measures, including more than £900 million of support from UK lenders.

Gerald Jones: Let me seek some further clarification. If there is any doubt that TUPE applies, can the Government confirm that they will instruct the official receiver to transfer employees on private sector contracts as if TUPE applied? Will the Government also ensure that trade union recognition is transferred with those staff?

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question and refer him to the recent Westminster Hall debate, where we discussed at some length the legal responsibilities in relation to TUPE, which do not apply in many cases during a liquidation. Transferring employers may well decide to offer terms to transferring employees that recognise existing employment rights, terms and conditions. The Government are focused on ensuring that transferred employees are no worse off, and the official receiver is doing all he can to facilitate this wherever possible.

Alex Chalk: The Carillion collapse has exposed what can only be described as market abuse by lead contractors, with subcontractors in Cheltenham suffering as a result...
of the failure to adhere to best practice schemes such as the prompt payment code. What steps are the Government taking to ensure compliance with the schemes and more generally to stamp out market abuse?

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend, who has met me on a number of occasions to defend the interests of businesses in his constituency, will know that the Government had two priorities: to protect the provision of vital public services and to do what we could to protect jobs in Carillion and jobs in the supply chain. We are clear that we must learn the lessons from the collapse of Carillion. This could be a catalyst for change for the good. We are concerned to ensure that we do all we can to learn the lessons on procurement, and we also want to do more to ensure that the supply chain is promptly paid and that small businesses are paid speedily. Looking at the prompt payment code is an important part of that.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Following on from the question from the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), when Carillion went bankrupt, many of the subcontractors had not been paid for 120 days. The money coming to Carillion was from the Government, so what are the Government doing to ensure that when they give contracts to big businesses, those businesses pay their subcontractors on time? Small businesses are the lifeblood of our economy and they have been destroyed by the collapse of Carillion.

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the hon. Lady for that question and particularly for the work that her Select Committee is doing in getting to the bottom of exactly what happened in Carillion. That is very important work. The Government are clear that with public sector contracts we pay in 30 days, and we expect tier 1 contractors to ensure that they pay their supply chain in 30 days too. We are determined to take action to ensure that this happens, and we are looking at what we can do to make sure not only that small businesses in the public sector supply chain get paid within 30 days, but that we do more to support private sector suppliers as well.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What support has been given to British nationals working abroad who were with Carillion?

Andrew Griffiths: The main priority for this Government has been to protect jobs here in the UK and the continuation of public sector contracts and services. The special manager, of course, has a responsibility to wind up the business to get the best value for creditors, but he is responsible for dealing with businesses overseas.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): For the Carillion workers who were not transferred under TUPE, what was the degradation of their terms?

Andrew Griffiths: I have met the hon. Lady several times, and I know that she is working hard to ensure that her constituents employed by Carillion get all the protections possible. The Secretary of State has had conversations with the special manager to ensure that wherever possible when contracts are transferred employees get like conditions so that they are no worse off. As she will understand, this is a very complex and complicated business, and I do not at the moment have the specific statistics she requests.

Self-employed People

11. Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): What steps he is taking to support self-employed people.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): We want people to be self-employed when it is the right thing for them, which is why the Government have introduced new measures to ensure they are even better supported. These include improved support for embarking on self-employed careers, encouraging pension saving and supporting people to pay the right tax. From 6 April 2016, we have also given self-employed people the ability to build their entitlement to the new state pension at the same rate as employed people.

Andrea Jenkyns: Morley is lucky to have a thriving high street, which matters to me as an ex-retailer. During the recent cold weather, Apollo Fisheries in Morley handed out free food to cold residents. What are the Government doing to support our businesses on the high street, and will the Minister take this opportunity to congratulate Apollo Fisheries on its fine example of Yorkshire hospitality at its best?

Andrew Griffiths: I think the House will recognise that I am no stranger to a fish supper, and I would like to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Apollo Fisheries on the community spirit it showed. It clearly demonstrates that businesses contribute not just to the economy but to our society. The future high streets forum provides joint business and Government leadership to enable our high streets and town centres to adapt and compete in the face of changing consumer and social trends, but we want to go further, so last week I announced the establishment of the Retail Sector Council, which will bring together leaders in retail to help to develop policies and support for the vital retail sector.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): We all want self-employment to grow, but we also want to crack down on apparent self-employment, where people are forced to become self-employed by exploitative employers who then save on national insurance contributions while putting all the risk of that employment on often vulnerable individuals. What are the Government doing about that?

Andrew Griffiths: I am sure the hon. Lady will be delighted to know that the Government are taking forward the proposals set out by Matthew Taylor. We recognise that employment status—whether workers are employed or self-employed—is key to their getting not only the payments but the protections they deserve. That is why we have embarked on a full consultation with the intention of clarifying the status of workers, giving them extra protections and ensuring that if it looks like work and feels like work, it is work and they are paid properly.
**Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The Government’s response to the Taylor review did virtually nothing to tackle the challenges and insecurity that self-employed people face. Equally poor was the Government’s response to the treatment of gig workers.

“Don has died and they should be making changes”.

Those were the words of DPD gig worker Don Lane’s widow, Ruth. With this in mind and with Matthew Taylor himself last week rating the Government’s response to the Taylor review a shocking four out of 10, what score would the Minister give himself?

**Andrew Griffiths**: Seven weeks in, I think I would give myself 10 out of 10. The hon. Lady quotes Matthew Taylor. He has said quite clearly that this is a complex and complicated matter. He wants us to get the definition of status right, because the rights of thousands of gig workers depend on it. That is why in the passage the hon. lady quotes he also said that when we have finished our consultation, if we deliver what we have promised he would give us seven or eight. I want to go further; I want it to be 10.

**Rebecca Long Bailey**: Ten out of 10 indeed! The Chancellor today might attempt to laud employment figures as positive news, but he will fail to state that over 3 million people are in insecure work, and, according to a recent report by the Centre for Labour and Social Studies, over a third of all workers do not even earn enough to live. There are also real fears, despite the Prime Minister’s assurances, that the quality of work will worsen still, with reports that the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers are pushing for major employment law deregulation. Will the Minister confirm whether his Department is carrying out any work looking at the deregulation of certain employment rights?

**Andrew Griffiths**: The hon. Lady must have missed the intention behind what the Government were doing with the Matthew Taylor report. Not only are we committed to continuing the existing employment rights and protections, but we are going further and faster than anywhere else—further and faster than our European colleagues—to give gig workers and others in vulnerable conditions, such as agency workers, greater protections than ever before. We are not just talking about it; we are protecting those workers.

**Small Business Sector**

12. **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): What steps he is taking to support growth in the small business sector.

**Mr Speaker**: I call the Minister.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy** (Andrew Griffiths): Apologies, Mr Speaker. I was congratulating myself ‘too much’.

The Government-owned British Business Bank provides £4 billion to support more than 60,000 UK small and medium-sized enterprises. We plan to unlock more than £20 billion of investment in innovative and high-potential businesses, including a new £2.5 billion investment fund with the British Business Bank. The Small Business Commissioner helps with payment issues, dispute resolution, and the sourcing of advice throughout the UK. Through the industrial strategy, we are continuing to invest in 38 growth hubs across England, as well as the business support helpline.

**Stephen Hammond**: Of course I join in the congratulations to the Minister, but he will know that one of the crucial requirements for the success of the small business sector is access to and understanding of finance, and there is considerable evidence that there is currently a knowledge gap in the market. What are the Government doing to address that?

**Andrew Griffiths**: My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. We are concerned by reports that businesses, particularly small businesses, are reticent about coming forward to access finance that could help them to invigorate and grow. That is why the British Business Bank produces “The business finance guide”, in partnership with the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales and industry bodies. The guide explains the different sources of finance that are available to smaller businesses, and is also published online. The British Business Bank will launch a new digital platform in the spring to raise awareness even further.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Small businesses in Cumbria, particularly those involved in farming and tourism, were integral to the Lake district’s gaining world heritage site status last summer, a designation that could lead to a massive increase in the number of visitors to what is already Britain’s second-biggest visitor destination. Will the Government back those small businesses with the infrastructure investment that they need in order to cope and to grow? Will they, for instance, electrify the Lakes Line?

**Andrew Griffiths**: I am delighted to support the small businesses to which the hon. Gentleman has referred. He will be pleased to know that we are boosting infrastructure, including digital infrastructure, with more than £1 billion of public investment, including £176 million for 5G and £200 million for local areas to encourage the roll-out of full-fibre networks. I should also be delighted to meet him to discuss what more we can do for lakeside businesses.

**Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Hitchin and Harpenden, which are both small towns, have a thriving independent retail sector, but in recent months they have reported that things are getting harder for them. Will the Minister reassure me that the Government are doing everything they can to help independent small retailers in thriving market towns?

**Andrew Griffiths**: As the retail Minister, I recognise the real challenges faced by our high streets and, in particular, by independent businesses. In his spring Budget statement, the Chancellor announced a package of measures for business rate relief, including a £1,000 discount for pubs with rateable values below £100,000, £300 million for local authorities to fund discretionary rate relief, and a cap on rate increases, which means that businesses that lose their small business rate relief will not see their bills increase.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Minister should stop being quite so complacent. Carillion was a signatory to the prompt payment code; Interserve still is. Carillion suppliers were paid on terms of 120 days,
while Interserve subcontractors say that they are being absolutely hammered by late payment. Yesterday the Federation of Small Businesses again highlighted the damage done to growth by late payment. When will Ministers support smaller firms in the public sector supply chain, and enforce the prompt payment code?

Andrew Griffiths: We are certainly not complacent, which was why we set up the trade body group to assess the impact of Carillion. The hon. Gentleman will be delighted to know that yesterday I spoke to Phil King, who runs the prompt payment code, and I will be meeting him later this week to discuss how we can tighten up the code and give it real teeth. We are determined to help small businesses.

Local Enterprise Partnerships

13. Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): What plans he has for the future of local enterprise partnerships.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): We remain firmly committed to local enterprise partnerships. As announced in the industrial strategy, we are currently reviewing the roles and responsibilities of LEPs so that they are able to play an important role in developing local industrial strategies and driving growth across the country as we prepare to leave the European Union.

Stephen McPartland: Hertfordshire LEP has been a disaster for Stevenage people. Does the Minister agree that it is shameful that growth deal round 1 money is being used to build new council offices and sell off public sector land for developers to build luxury flats, with less than 10% being affordable homes?

Mr Gyimah: Some £15 million of growth deal round 1 money has already been invested in Stevenage, and that has helped to leverage a commitment of £350 million of private investment into the town. My hon. Friend raises an issue of concern, and I urge him to speak to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to resolve it.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I invite the ministerial team to step out of its bubble by coming to Yorkshire and talking to our local enterprise partnerships to respond to their pessimism that while London and the south might survive post Brexit, the midlands, the north and the regions will be in bitterly disappointed territory?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman talks manufacturing down, but manufacturing is doing incredibly well in the north of England. He will also be aware that “place” is one of the five pillars of our industrial strategy, and we are determined to deliver across the country.

Euratom

14. Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving Euratom on (a) the economy and (b) scientific research in Oxfordshire.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I know that the hon. Lady has a keen interest in this subject, and we have met to discuss the impact on many of her constituents working at the Culham Centre for Fusion Energy. As she knows, our assessment was detailed in the “Nuclear Sector Report” at the end of December last year, and in an impact assessment for the Nuclear Safeguards Bill, which was first published on 18 December. We continue to engage with stakeholders, and the hon. Lady knows that my door is always open if she wishes to discuss this matter further.

Layla Moran: I thank the Minister for his response. We know that the Government are seeking a close association with Euratom, but with just 109 days until Austria takes up the presidency, Oxfordshire needs clarity now to plan for the future. Can the Government categorically say they are seeking an associate agreement, and can they guarantee that they will kick-start the process before 1 July?

Richard Harrington: I can confirm that, as the hon. Lady knows, we are seeking the closest possible association with Euratom. We are working very hard to achieve that objective.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does the Minister agree that when the recent meeting of the all-party group on nuclear fusion, which I chair, the Government’s attitude to expanding their collaboration in nuclear activity was greatly evident?

Richard Harrington: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He also has a keen constituency interest in this, and I am very keen to represent the interests of his constituents.

Topical Questions

T1. Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Since our last questions, Toyota has announced, as I said a few moments ago, that it would build its new model in Derbyshire, with most of the engines coming from the Deeside factory in north Wales. We also published our response to the Taylor review on modern employment practices. A million more vulnerable consumers will be protected by the extension of the Ofgem safeguard tariff cap and, as Members know, the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill has been introduced into Parliament. Yesterday, as part of our industrial strategy, we announced a major £300 million research programme into technologies to serve the ageing population and to ensure that we can benefit from this encouraging global trend.

Mark Menzies: What engagement is the Secretary of State having with a Canadian company called Brookfield, the likely buyer of Springfields nuclear fuels in my constituency, which manufactures nuclear fuel for the UK and provides over 1,200 well-paid jobs?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is a champion of this sector. The Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), has met the vice-
president of Brookfield and expressed our continuing support for Springfields to have a future in providing fuel for plants in this country and overseas.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): GKN was forged in our country’s first industrial revolution. It built the tanks used in the D-day landings, and its innovative battery technology will power our future economy. The Government’s industrial strategy identifies batteries as a key technology and manufacturing as a priority sector, yet the Secretary of State has nothing to say about the hostile takeover of that great firm. Why is it that all too often, as with Arm and Unilever, his industrial strategy seems to leave great British success stories less great or less British?

Greg Clark: I would have thought that the hon. Lady would have informed herself as to the responsibility of Ministers under the Enterprise Act 2002. That Act, which was passed under the previous Labour Government, states that Ministers can intervene only in mergers that raise public interest concerns on the grounds of national security, financial stability or media plurality. She should know that the Government’s corporate governance reforms have ensured that GKN had longer to prepare its defence, preventing the kind of smash and grab raid that Cadbury’s was subjected to under the previous Government, and that provision has been made for legally binding undertakings to be given in takeover bids. Those are intended to be used, and I would be surprised and disappointed if any bidder did not make their intentions clear, extensive and legally binding.

T2. [904350] Mrs Sherryl Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Can my hon. Friend assure me that protected status for Cornish produce such as the Cornish pasty will not be compromised post-Brexit?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): It is said that I am no stranger to the fish supper, and I also have knowledge of the Cornish pasty and, indeed, Cornish clotted cream. All those products will achieve UK geographical indications and will continue to be protected in the UK after our EU exit. As negotiations are ongoing, I cannot give my hon. Friend a cast-iron undertaking to be given in takeover bids. Those are intended to be used, and I would be surprised and disappointed if any bidder did not make their intentions clear, extensive and legally binding.

T3. [904351] Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Late and non-payment of retention payments in the construction industry is affecting small firms in Moray and across the UK. When will Ministers deal with that issue?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): The Government are determined to improve payment practices, and we understand that retentions have caused problems for contractors in the supply chain. We consulted on the contractual practice of cash retention and we are now considering the responses to assess the extent of the issues and to determine what further intervention is required.

T4. [904352] Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): According to the tidal energy industry leader Tidal Lagoon Power, Southport is considered to be one of the best locations in the United Kingdom for a tidal lagoon. Will my right hon. Friend therefore meet me to discuss the possibility of bringing tidal energy to Southport?

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): My hon. Friend is, as ever, assiduous in promoting the interests of his constituency, and I would be delighted to meet him. I should point out that the lagoon project in his constituency is currently not part of the proposal being put forward by the company promoting other tidal projects.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Government raised business rates on rooftop solar schemes by up to 800% last year, and it now appears that on-site battery storage is likely to go the same way. Given that gas combined heat and power has been exempted from business rates, should not the Government do the same for solar and battery storage to support clean energy?

Claire Perry: Our solar capacity has increased by more than 30% in the past two years, so we clearly are bringing forward such schemes. The hon. Gentleman will know that we are looking closely at ways of reducing some of the disincentives, particularly around on-site storage, but I am happy to meet him to discuss things further.

T5. [904353] Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I am grateful to Carl Webb, my Communication Workers Union regional political officer, for bringing to my attention the BT Sport call centre in my constituency, which is paying the minimum wage to agency workers beyond 12 weeks using the Swedish derogation. The Taylor report talked about getting rid of the Swedish derogation, so when are the Government going to act to protect some of our lowest paid workers?

Andrew Griffiths: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are acting right now; a consultation is under way with regard to the Swedish derogation. Firms and businesses should be in no doubt that this Government expect everyone to be paid either the national minimum wage or the national living wage. That is why we have doubled the amount of enforcement and protected the pay of 98,000 workers. We are absolutely committed to everybody getting paid the national minimum wage.

T6. [904354] Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the south-west is a great region in which to do business? Will he join me in recognising the work of the Barnstaple and District chamber of commerce, which I met on Friday, in promoting North Devon as, without doubt, the region’s economic powerhouse?
Andrew Griffiths: The south-west is indeed a great region in which to do business. Chambers of commerce including Barnstaple’s, which has been serving its community since 1911, have a valuable role to play in supporting local businesses and ensuring that their voice is heard. That is why I have met chambers of commerce 11 times in the seven weeks in which I have been the Minister for small business.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Solar power is the most popular source of clean energy and one of the cheapest, so why has it been excluded from clean power auctions for the past three years? Why oh why does it continue to be excluded, putting the industry at a clear competitive disadvantage?

Claire Perry: We continue to look at ways of bringing forward all forms of renewable energy. Indeed, up to 30% of energy generation in this country now comes from renewables. We have not yet taken decisions about future contract for difference allocation rounds, but we intend to do so.

T7. [904355] Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The banking scandals at RBS destroyed thousands of businesses, but the owners of those businesses have no means of seeking justice or recompense. Will the Minister support the proposal of the all-party group on fair business banking and finance for redress through an independent tribunal system?

Andrew Griffiths: I pay tribute to the work of the all-party group, of which my hon. Friend is a vice-chair. I met it just last week to explore the options. I share his aim that small businesses should have an accessible and impartial forum through which to seek redress when things go wrong. There is work to be done on how that would be paid for and on whether legislation would be required, but I look forward to seeing the research and to working with him.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The 220 people who work at GKN Aerospace in my constituency produce windshields for military and commercial aircraft, so is that not another indication that the hostile takeover bid raises national security implications? The Secretary of State has the power to intervene under the Enterprise Act 2002.

Greg Clark: As we have met to discuss this matter, the hon. Gentleman knows that I must ensure that I do not prejudice any assessment. I set out to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) the constraints under which I have to operate.

T8. [904356] Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Last October’s “Made Smarter” review set out how manufacturing businesses in East Renfrewshire and across the UK can be transformed through the adoption of industrial digital technology. How will the Government support “Made Smarter” now that it has been announced as a deal in development in the industrial strategy?

Richard Harrington: I have met Juergen Maier, the chief executive of Siemens UK, to discuss that. At a recent dinner, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced a “Made Smarter” commission and asked Sir Mark Walport to work with Juergen on the development of an industrial strategy challenge for the digitisation of our manufacturing industry.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The number of electric vehicles on our roads is likely to increase significantly over the next few years. What work is being done to ensure that charging points are more frequently powered by renewable sources over that period?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. Part of our industrial strategy is about bringing together the energy and automotive sectors, so that one reinforces the other. That is the Faraday challenge, which is attracting so much attention in both industries.

T10. [904358] Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Given our close defence and trading relationship with the United States, will the Minister reassure the House that he is making efforts to secure an exemption for UK-produced steel and aluminium products from next week’s imposition of tariffs?

Richard Harrington: I was in Brussels yesterday to meet other European Union Ministers, trade union leaders and representatives of employers to ensure that we do exactly that.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee has heard powerful evidence on why the Government should call in the Melrose bid for GKN on national security grounds, and the Secretary of State for Defence has written to the Business Secretary about the matter. Will the Business Secretary use his powers, before it is too late, to protect this great British engineering giant?

Greg Clark: I will look very carefully at the report of the Committee and that will be one of the pieces of evidence that I will seriously consider.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Secretary of State has said that his door is still open to discussions about the benefits of green energy, so will he commit today to seeing Charles Hendry—the author of the Hendry review, which is still awaiting a response from the Government 14 months on—me, as chair of the all-party group on marine energy and tidal lagoons, and representatives of Tidal Lagoon Power and TidalStream?

Claire Perry: It is always a pleasure to respond to my hon. Friend, who is an assiduous campaigner for this form of energy. We continue to commit to supporting our marine energy industry. I refer him to the answer that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave at the start of questions. We continue to exchange information with the Welsh Government, and we have to understand what is on offer. We want to reach the right decision on behalf of low-carbon technologies, but also British bill payers and taxpayers.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The county in which I live, Flintshire, has only two electric charging points. Given the earlier exchanges, can the Secretary of State set targets for charging points in rural areas as well as urban ones?
Greg Clark: The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. It is true that the charging network needs to extend right across the country if people are to have the confidence that they will be able to recharge their vehicle, and we have the rural aspect very much in mind.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): According to the press, the Secretary of State gave a presentation to a Sub-Committee of the Cabinet about the automotive sector and how important it is that we do not have a hard Brexit. That seems to have persuaded members of the Cabinet who had thought that a hard Brexit might be a good idea that it would, in fact, be a very bad idea for British business, notably the automotive sector. On that basis, will the Secretary of State make that presentation available to all right hon. and hon. Members?

Greg Clark: It would be wrong of me to disclose conversations that took place in Cabinet—my right hon. Friend understands the requirements of collective responsibility—but it is no secret to anyone in this House that I regard the fact that the success of the automotive sector depends on integrated supply chains as good evidence of what type of trade agreement is needed. That was highlighted in the excellent speech made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the Mansion House.
12.32 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): I am pleased to introduce to the House the first spring statement. The UK was the only major economy to make hundreds of tax and spending changes twice a year, and major international organisations and UK professional bodies alike have been pressing for change. In 2016, I took the decision to move to a single fiscal event in the autumn, giving greater certainty to families and businesses ahead of the new financial year and allowing more time for stakeholder and parliamentary engagement on potential fiscal changes.

Today’s statement will update the House on the economic and fiscal position, report progress on announcements made at the two Budgets last year and launch further consultations ahead of Budget 2018, as I set out today in my written ministerial statement. I will not be producing a Red Book today, but of course I cannot speak for the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell).

I am pleased to report today to the House on a UK economy that has grown in every year since 2010—an economy that, under Conservative leadership, now has a manufacturing sector enjoying its longest unbroken run of growth for 50 years, that has added 3 million jobs and seen every single region of the UK with higher employment and lower unemployment than in 2010, that has seen the wages of the lowest-paid up by almost 7% above inflation since April 2015 and that has seen income inequality lower than at any time under the last Labour Government. That is solid progress towards building an economy that works for everyone.

So I reject the Labour party’s doom and gloom about the state of the nation. Every Wednesday, we have to listen to the Leader of the Opposition relentlessly talking Britain down, and every year since 2010 we have had to listen to the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington predict a recession—none of which has actually happened.

So if there are any Eeyores in the Chamber, they are on the Opposition Benches; I, meanwhile, am at my most positively Tigger-like today, as I contemplate a country that faces the future with unique strengths: our language is the global language of business; our legal system is the jurisdiction of choice for commerce; we host the world’s most global city and its international finance and professional services capital; our companies are in the vanguard of the technological revolution, while our world-class universities are delivering the breakthrough discoveries and inventions that are powering it; British culture and talent reaches huge audiences across the globe; and our tech sector is attracting skills and capital from the four corners of the earth, with a new tech business being founded somewhere in the UK every hour, producing world-class products, including apps such as TransferWise, Citymapper and Matt Hancock.

Today, the Office for Budget Responsibility delivers its second report for the fiscal year 2017-18, and I thank Robert Chote and his team for their work. It forecasts more jobs, rising real wages, declining inflation, a falling deficit and a shrinking debt. The economy grew by 1.7% in 2017, compared with the 1.5% forecast at the Budget, and the OBR has revised up its forecast for 2018 from 1.4% to 1.5%. Forecast growth is then unchanged at 1.3% in 2019 and 2020, before picking up to 1.4% in 2021 and 1.5% in 2022. That is the OBR’s forecast, but forecasts are there to be beaten; as a nation, we did it in 2017, and we should make it our business to do it again.

Our remarkable jobs story is set to continue, with the OBR forecasting more jobs in every year of this Parliament and over 500,000 more people enjoying the security of a regular pay packet by 2022. I am pleased to report that the OBR expects inflation, which is currently above target at 3%, to fall back to target over the next 12 months, meaning that real wage growth is expected to be positive from first quarter of 2018-19 and to increase steadily thereafter.

I reported in the autumn that borrowing was due to fall in every year of the forecast and debt was to fall as a share of GDP from 2018-19. The OBR confirms that today, and further revises down debt and borrowing in every year. Borrowing is now forecast to be £45.2 billion this year. That is £4.7 billion lower than forecast in November and £108 billion lower than in 2010, which, coincidentally, is almost exactly the total cost of the additional spending pledges made by the Labour party since the general election in June last year; it has taken them just nine months to work up a plan to squander the fruits of eight years’ hard work by the British people.

As a percentage of GDP, borrowing is forecast to be 2.2% in 2017-18, falling to 1.8% in 2018-19, 1.6% in 2019-20, then 1.3%, 1.1% and finally 0.9% in 2022-23, meaning that in 2018-19 we will run a small current surplus, borrowing only for capital investment. And we are forecast to meet our cyclically adjusted borrowing target in 2020-21 with £15.4 billion of headroom to spare, which is broadly as forecast at the Budget. The more favourable outlook for borrowing means the debt forecast is nearly 1% lower than in November, peaking at 85.6% of GDP in 2017-18 and then falling to 85.5% in 2018-19, then 85.1%, 82.1%, 78.3%, and finally 77.9% in 2022-23.

That is the first sustained fall in debt in 17 years; a turning point in this nation’s recovery from the financial crisis of a decade ago; light at the end of the tunnel; another step on the road to rebuilding the public finances that were decimated by the Labour party. And it is one that Labour would again place at risk, because under Labour’s policies, our debt would not fall over the next five years; it would rise by more than £350 billion to more than 100% of our GDP, undermining our recovery, threatening investment in British jobs, burdening the next generation and wasting billions and billions of pounds more on debt interest. There is indeed light at the end of the tunnel, but we have to make absolutely sure that it is not the shadow Chancellor’s train hurtling out of control in the other direction towards Labour’s next economic train wreck.

In autumn 2016, I changed the fiscal rules to give us more flexibility to adopt a balanced approach to repairing the public finances. We are reducing debt not for some ideological reason, but to secure our economy against future shocks, because we in the Conservative party are not so naive as to think that we have abolished the economic cycle, because we want to see taxpayers’ money funding our schools and hospitals, not wasted on debt interest, and because we want to give the next generation a fair chance. But I do not agree with those who argue that every available penny must be used to
reduce the deficit; nor do I agree with the fiscal fantasists opposite who argue that every penny should be spent immediately. We will continue to deliver a balanced approach. We are balancing debt reduction against the need for investment in Britain's future, support to hardworking families through lower taxes and our commitment to our public services.

Judge me by my record. [ Interruption.] We will see whether the Opposition have done their homework; they might be surprised. Since the 2016 autumn statement, I have committed to £60 billion of new spending, shared between long-term investment in Britain's future and support for our public services, with almost £9 billion extra for our NHS and our social care system. There is £4 billion going into the NHS in 2018-19 alone and, as I promised at the autumn Budget, more to come if, as I hope, management and unions reach an agreement on a pay modernisation deal for our nation's nurses and "Agenda for Change" staff, who have worked tirelessly since the autumn, in very challenging circumstances, to provide the NHS care that we all value so highly. There is £2.2 billion more for education and skills and £31 billion to fund infrastructure, research and development and homes; through the national productivity investment fund. That takes public investment in our schools, hospitals and infrastructure in this Parliament to its highest sustained level in 40 years.

At the same time, we have cut taxes for 31 million working people by raising the personal allowance again, in line with our manifesto commitment. We have taken more than 4 million people out of tax altogether since 2010. We are freezing fuel duty for an eighth successive year, taking the saving for a typical car driver to £850, compared with Labour's plans, and raising the national living wage to £7.83 from next month, giving the lowest paid in our society a well-deserved pay rise of more than £2,000 for a full-time worker since 2015.

Since becoming Chancellor, I have provided an extra £11 billion of funding for 2018-19 to help with short-term public spending pressures and to invest in Britain's future. In the longer term, I can confirm that, at this year's Budget, I will set an overall path for public spending for 2020 and beyond, with a detailed spending review to take place in 2019 to allocate funding between Departments. That is how responsible people budget: first, they work out what they can afford; then they decide what their priorities are; and then they allocate between them. If, in the autumn, the public finances continue to reflect the improvements that today's report hints at, then, in accordance with our balanced approach and using the flexibility provided by the fiscal rules, I would have capacity to enable further increases in public spending and investment in the years ahead, while continuing to drive value for money to ensure that not a single penny of precious taxpayers' money is wasted. We are taking a balanced approach—getting our debt down, supporting our public services, investing in our nation's future and keeping taxes low—as we build a Britain fit for the future and an economy that works for everyone.

There is much still to do. Since autumn 2016, we have set out our plan to back the enterprise and ambition of British business and the hard work of the British people. It is a plan to unleash our creators and innovators, our inventors and discoverers, to embrace the new technologies of the future and to deliver the skills that we will need to benefit from them. It is a plan to tackle our long-standing productivity challenges and to say more loudly than ever that our economy will remain open and outward looking, confident of competing with the best in the world.

We choose to champion those who create the jobs and the wealth on which our prosperity and our public services both depend, not to demonise them. The shadow Chancellor is open about his ideological desire to undermine the market economy, which has driven an unparalleled increase in our living standards over the past 50 years. We on the Conservative Benches reject his approach outright. The market economy embraces talent, creates opportunity and provides jobs for millions and the tax revenues that underpin our public services, so we will go on supporting British businesses. We are reducing business rates by more than £10 billion, and we committed at autumn Budget 2017 to move to triennial revaluations from 2022. Today, I am pleased to announce that we will bring forward the next business rates revaluation to 2021 and move to triennial reviews from that date. We will also launch a call for evidence to understand how best we can help the UK's least productive businesses to learn from, and to catch up with, the most productive, and another on how we can eliminate the continuing scourge of late payments— a key ask from small business. We are the party of small business and the champions of the entrepreneur.

Since the Budget, we have made substantial progress in our negotiations with the European Union to deliver a Brexit that supports British jobs, businesses and prosperity. I look forward—[ Interruption. ] I do not know what the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) does, but I look forward to another important step forward at the European Council next week. We will continue to prepare for all eventualities. Today, my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary is publishing the departmental allocations of over £1.5 billion of Brexit preparation funding for 2018-19, which I announced at the autumn Budget.

Our modern industrial strategy sets out our plan to keep Britain at the forefront of new technologies with the biggest increase in public research and development spending for four decades. Much of this new technology depends on high-speed broadband, and today I can make the first allocations of the £190 million local full-fibre challenge fund announced at the autumn Budget and confirm £25 million for the first 5G testbeds.

As our economy changes, we must ensure that people have the skills they need to seize the opportunities ahead, so we have committed over £500 million a year to T-levels—the most ambitious post-16 reforms in 70 years. From next month, £50 million will be available to help employers to prepare for the roll-out of T-level work placements. Last week the Education Secretary and I chaired the first meeting of the national retraining partnership between the Government, the TUC and the Confederation of British Industry. I can reassure the House that there was no beer and no sandwiches—not even a canapé—but there was a clear and shared commitment to training in order to prepare the British people for a better future ahead. Next month our £29 million construction skills fund will open for bids to fund up to 20 construction skills villages around the country.

The Government are committed to delivering 3 million apprenticeship starts by 2020, with the support of business through the apprenticeship levy, but we recognise the
[Mr Philip Hammond]

challenges that the new system presents to some small businesses looking to employ an apprentice, so I can announce today that my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary will release up to £80 million of funding to support those small businesses in engaging an apprentice. We publish a consultation on improving the way in which the tax system supports self-funded training by employees and the self-employed. Because we currently understand more about the economic payback from investing in our infrastructure than we do about investing in our people, I have asked the Office for National Statistics to work with us on developing a more sophisticated measure of human capital so that future investment can be better targeted.

We are undertaking the largest road building programme since the 1970s. As Transport Secretary in 2011, I gave the green light to fund the new bridge across the River Mersey, and I was delighted to see it open late last year. The largest infrastructure project in Europe, Crossrail, is due to open in just nine months’ time. We are making progress on our plans to deliver the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford corridor. We are devolving powers and budgets to elected mayors across the northern powerhouse and midlands engine. We are in negotiations for city deals with Stirling and Clackmannanshire, Tay cities, borderlands, north Wales, mid Wales and Belfast. Today we invite proposals from cities across England for the £840 million fund that I announced at the Budget to deliver on their local transport priorities as part of our plans to spread growth and opportunity to all parts of this United Kingdom.

At the heart of our plan for building an economy that works for everyone is our commitment to tackle the challenges in our housing market, with an investment programme of £44 billion to raise housing supply to 300,000 a year by the mid-2020s. Today I can update the House. The Housing Minister is working currently with 44 authorities who have bid into the £4.1 billion housing infrastructure fund to unlock homes in areas of high demand. We are concluding housing deals with ambitious authorities that have agreed to deliver above their local housing need. I can announce today that we have just agreed a deal with the West Midlands Combined Authority, which has committed to deliver 215,000 homes by 2030-31, facilitated by a £100 million grant from the land remediation fund. My hon. Friend the Housing Minister will make further announcements over the next few days on the housing infrastructure fund.

We will more than double the size of the housing growth partnership with Lloyds Banking Group to £220 million, providing additional finance for small builders. London will receive an additional £1.7 billion to deliver a further 26,000 affordable homes, including homes for social rent, taking total affordable housing delivery in London to over 116,000 by the end of 2021-22.

My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) has outlined his initial findings on the gap between planning permissions granted and housing completions in a letter that I have placed in the Library. I look forward to his full report at the Budget. I am delighted to inform the House that an estimated 60,000 first-time buyers have already benefited from the stamp duty relief that I announced at the autumn Budget. I remind the House that the Labour party voted against this.

In the autumn we published a paper on taxing large digital businesses in the global economy. Today we follow up with a publication that explores potential solutions. I look forward to discussing this issue with G20 Finance Ministers in Buenos Aires at the weekend. We also publish a call for evidence on how online platforms can help their users to pay the right amount of tax, and we will consult on a new VAT collection mechanism for online sales to ensure that the VAT that consumers pay actually reaches the Treasury. We will also call for evidence on how to encourage cashless and digital payments while ensuring that cash remains available for those who need it.

The Government are determined that our generation should leave the natural environment in a better state than we found it and improve the quality of the air that we breathe, so we will publish a call for evidence on whether the use of non-agricultural red diesel tax relief contributes to poor air quality in urban areas. Following our successful intervention to incentivise clean taxis, we will help the Great British white van driver to go green with a consultation on reduced vehicle excise duty rates for the cleanest vans.

We will follow up on the vital issue of plastic littering and the threat to our oceans with a call for evidence to support us in delivering on our vow to tackle this complex issue. It will look at the whole supply chain for single-use plastics, and at alternative materials, reusable options and recycling opportunities. It will look at how the tax system can help to drive the technological progress and behavioural change that we need—as a way not of raising revenue, but of changing behaviour and encouraging innovation. We will commit to investing to develop new, greener products and processes, funded from the revenues raised. As a down payment, we will award £20 million now from existing departmental budgets to businesses and universities in order to stimulate new thinking and rapid solutions in this area during the call for evidence.

We are delivering on our plan with a balanced approach, restoring the public finances, investing in our economy and our public services, raising productivity through our modern industrial strategy, building the homes our people need, tackling the environmental challenges that threaten our future, embracing technological change and seizing the opportunities ahead as we build our vision of a country that works for everyone and an economy where prosperity and opportunity are in reach of all, wherever they live and whatever their gender, colour, creed or background, where talent and hard work alone determine success, as a beacon of enterprise and innovation and an outward-looking, free-trading nation, confident that our best days lie ahead of us, a force for good in the world and a country that we can all be proud to pass on to our children. I commend this statement to the House.

12.58 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I thank the Chancellor for providing me with early sight of his statement, but I have to say that his complacency today is astounding. We face in every public service a
crisis on a scale that we have never seen before. Has he not listened to the doctors, nurses, teachers, police officers, carers and even his own officials? They are telling him that they cannot wait for the next Budget. They are telling him to act now. For eight years they have been ignored by this Government, and today they have been ignored again.

The Chancellor has proclaimed today that there is light at the end of the tunnel. This shows just how cut off from the real world he is. Last year, growth in our economy was among the lowest in the G7—the slowest since 2012. The OBR has just predicted that we will scrape along the bottom for future years. Wages are lower now, in real terms, than they were in 2010—and they are still falling. According to the Resolution Foundation, the changes to benefits due to come in next month will leave 11 million families worse off—and, as always, the harshest cuts fall on disabled people.

The gap in productivity between this country and the rest of the G7 is almost the widest for a generation. UK industry is 20% to 30% less productive than in other major economies—and why? In part, the reason is that investment. London will, again, receive five times more investment. London will, again, receive five times more investment. London will, again, receive five times more investment. London will, again, receive five times more investment. London will, again, receive five times more investment. Business investment stagnated in the last quarter of 2017. Despite all the promises, the Government continue to fail to address the regional imbalances in investment.

How dare this Government speak on climate change? This is a Government who singlehandedly destroyed the solar industry, with 12,000 jobs lost as a result of subsidy cuts. The Chancellor talks about the fourth industrial revolution, but Britain has the lowest rate of industrial robot use in the OECD. The Government have put £75 million into their artificial intelligence programme—less than a tenth of what the US is spending.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Talking of artificial intelligence!

John McDonnell: The Tory bully boys can shout all they want. They can make—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must calm down.

Simon Hoare: They can make—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There will be plenty of opportunity for questioning from Members in all parts of the House. The right hon. Gentleman must be heard.

John McDonnell: I am appealing to Tory MPs today, if they are serious about ending austerity, to vote with us this afternoon to give those children the free school meal they are entitled to.

The Chancellor has shifted the deficit on to the Secretary of State for Education and head teachers, with the first per capita cut in schools funding since the 1990s. Today the Government are even trying to deprive 1 million children of a decent school dinner. I am asking the Chancellor, and I am asking every Conservative MP—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must calm down.

John McDonnell: I am appealing to Tory MPs today, if they are serious about ending austerity, to vote with us this afternoon to give those children the free school meal they are entitled to.

The Chancellor has shifted the deficit on to the Home Secretary and the Justice Secretary. Crime is rising, yet he has cut the number of police officers by 21,500 and the number of firefighters by 8,500, and our prisons and probation service are in dangerous crisis. In shifting the deficit on to the shoulders of the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, in reality he has shifted the burden on to local councillors—Labour, Lib Dem and Conservative councillors alike. I raise again the stark reality of what that means for the most vulnerable children in our society. There has been a 40% cut in early intervention funding. The result is the highest number of children taken into care since the 1980s. Children’s charities—not us but children’s charities—are saying that this crisis could turn into a catastrophe without further funding. Last year, 400 women seeking refuge were turned away because there were no places available for them in refuges. There are now nearly 5,000 of our fellow citizens sleeping rough on our streets—more than double the number in 2010. Tragically, one of our homeless citizens died only feet away from the entrance to Parliament.

The Chancellor mentioned additional housing funding in London. The additional housing funding announced for London today is not a new announcement: this is money already announced. Any new funding is welcome, but it is simply not enough and it represents a cut in London’s budgets compared with the money that Labour allocated in 2010. One million vulnerable older people have no access to the social care they need. Conservative
Councils are going bust. Many will be forced to hike up council tax. Councils are running out of reserves, as the National Audit Office explained to us. I ask the Chancellor: will he listen to Conservative council leaders, such as the leader of Surrey, who said:

“We are facing the most difficult financial crisis in our history. The government cannot stand idly by while Rome burns”?

How many more children have to go into care? How many more councils have to go bust? How many more have to run out of reserves before the Chancellor wakes up to this crisis and acts?

Today’s statement could have been a genuine turning point but it is, depressingly, another missed opportunity. People know now that austerity was a political choice, not an economic necessity. The Conservatives chose to cut taxes for the super-rich, the corporations and the bankers, and it was paid for by the rest of us in society. They even cut the levy on the bankers in the Finance Bill. We were never “all in this together” as they claimed—never. They cut investment at the very time when we should have been developing the skills and infrastructure needed to raise productivity and grasp the technological revolution with both hands. And when they had a responsibility to meet the challenge of Brexit, we have a Chancellor who this weekend admitted he has not even modelled the Government’s options.

Today we have the indefensible spectacle of a Chancellor congratulating himself on marginally improved economic forecasts, while he refuses to lift a finger as councils go bust, the NHS and social care are in crisis, school budgets are cut, homelessness has doubled and wages are falling. This is not a Government preparing our country for the future; it is a Government setting us up to fail.

Mr Hammond: The right hon. Gentleman supported the switch to a single fiscal event, and now he is complaining that I have not delivered a mini Budget today. I am not surprised that he cannot quite understand anybody passing up the opportunity to introduce some new taxes, because that is what a Labour Government would be doing, not once a year or twice a year but every other week.

I heard the right hon. Gentleman referring to some of my hon. Friends as “Tory bully boys”. I remind the House that this is the man who still refuses to apologise to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, so I do not want to hear anything about bullying from the Labour Benches. The public will draw their own conclusions.

The right hon. Gentleman knows his Lenin, of course. The task is to win power, and that is why we see from him the smooth reassuring mien of the bank manager, but every now and again, the mask slips, and we get a glimpse of the sinister ideology that lies beneath—an ideology that would wreck our economy if he ever gets anywhere near the controls, threatening confiscation, dismissing property rights, undermining the cornerstones of our economy and the basis of our freedom and prosperity.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about political choices. Let me tell him the political choices we have made. We have closed the tax gap to one of the lowest in the developed world. We have raised £175 billion by 100 measures against tax evasion and avoidance. We are collecting 28% of all income tax from the richest 1% in our country—a higher percentage than in any year under Labour. He says that real wages are falling. I have good news for him: the OBR expects real wages to rise from quarter one 2018, which, in case he has not worked out, starts in two weeks’ time.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about spending on the disabled. Well, I have good news for him again: spending on the disabled will be higher in every year of this Parliament. He talks about research and development to support our economy. Research and development spending is at a record high.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about funding for the NHS. I have put £9 billion into the NHS since autumn statement 2016. He talks about school budgets. School budgets are increasing per pupil in real terms. On children’s services, he must know that Department for Education research shows that spending on the most vulnerable children has increased by around half a billion pounds in real terms since 2010. We have committed £1 billion to tackling rough sleeping and homelessness and made a manifesto pledge to eliminate rough sleeping by 2027 and halve it by 2022.

No one watching our exchanges today can be in any doubt that Britain faces a choice. We have a plan to get our economy growing. The shadow Chancellor says it does not matter whether GDP grows or not. We have a plan to get people on the housing ladder, while the shadow Chancellor does not want “to get bogged down in property rights”. We have a plan to deal with our debts. The shadow Chancellor wants to send debts soaring because he fantasises that he can borrow for free.

The choice is clear: our vision of a dynamic, modern economy, or the Labour party’s vision of an inward-looking, narrow-minded country. We have to win this argument, because if we do not, it will be ordinary people—not the rich and the powerful and not the globally mobile—who pay the price, as they always do for Labour’s failings.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his very forceful statement based on competent government and grown-up politics, which are worlds that the shadow Chancellor will never enter. When my right hon. Friend comes to prepare his Budget for November, I am sure he will be looking for
any new source of taxation that may be needed to put even more money than he already has into the NHS and social care, which are facing vast increases in demand.

May I suggest that my right hon. Friend looks at some of the extraordinary anomalies he has inherited in the tax treatment of older prosperous people in full-time work in this country? [Laughter.] Well, I think I am perfectly well placed to make my point and cannot be accused of personal bias. It is absurd that older employees pay less tax on their income than their younger colleagues because they do not pay national insurance. It cannot be right that people in large houses enjoying capital gains from the housing market have those disregarded for means test purposes if they ever need certain types of social care. As the early Budgets in a Parliament are a time for tough and difficult decisions, will my right hon. Friend let me know that he will be looking at those much overdue anomalies, which need to be addressed? Some justice between the generations, I think, is being demanded by our constituents.

Mr Hammond: I am a great fan of the concept of intergenerational fairness. My right hon. and learned Friend will know, as a former Chancellor of the Exchequer, that all Chancellors look at all options in the run-up to every Budget. I can undertake that I will do so in the run-up to Budget 2018. In the meantime, I can tell him that there is a mechanism for voluntary donations to Her Majesty’s Treasury, and in case he has mislaid it, I will send him a copy of our bank details.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I have to say, that was much ado about nothing. The real tragedy is that we are 10 years on from the financial crisis, but austerity is still with us, and there was a lack of hope given to the people of the United Kingdom from the statement today.

At the weekend, we saw the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) at the Glasgow Celtic versus Rangers football match, in his other job as a linesman, waving his flag and enthusiastically calling for a red card. If anybody deserves a red card today, it is the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

We hear the Chancellor proclaiming that we have had consistent economic growth since 2010 and that we can look forward to continued economic growth over the course of the coming years. The reality is that in 2019, when we are supposed to be leaving the European Union, the OBR predicts that growth will be a measly 1.3% and is forecast to remain at around 1.5% over the coming years, significantly below the historical trendline of growth for this country.

When I hear the Chancellor talking about wage growth, he ought to reflect that we have had a lost decade of wage growth in the United Kingdom. Let me prick his balloon on this one, because the OBR book is very clear that real earnings growth will “remain subdued” for the next five years. That is the reality, and perhaps the Chancellor should stop spinning and be honest with people about what is going to happen. The Chancellor talks about light at the end of the tunnel. Let me tell him that the light at the end of the tunnel is a hard Brexit and the impact of lower growth, which is going to cost jobs and prosperity in this country.

Slow earnings growth, higher inflation and cuts to the benefit system are resulting in falling incomes for the poorest households and in rising inequality. Once again, the Chancellor has failed to bring his Government’s disastrous austerity programme to an end. Worse still, he has his head firmly in the sand over Brexit.

This Government are going ahead with a devastating cut to Scotland’s budget. [Interjection.] I hear the Scottish Tories shouting “Rubbish”. Perhaps they could join those of us on the SNP Benches and defend Scotland’s interests. Let me explain the reality: over the decade from 2010-11 to 2019-20, Scotland’s block grant has been cut by £2.6 billion in real terms, which is an 8.1% cut. [Interjection.] The people of Scotland should watch the Scottish Tory MPs who are calling out: once again, they are failing to stand up for Scotland’s interests. [Interjection.] Let me say respectfully that these Tory MPs have been here for quite some months, and they should understand that if they want to speak, they should try to catch your eye, Mr Speaker. It is undignified to call out in the way they are doing. [Interjection.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is much excitable gesticulation taking place on both sides of the House. I urge Members to keep their Order Papers to themselves, and not to lash out with their hands, gesticulating in all sorts of directions. They are in danger of becoming rather eccentric denizens of the House.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker. These are, after all, serious matters. The extent of the block grant reduction is highlighted by the Fraser of Allander Institute, which has noted:

“By 2019/20 the resource block grant will be around £500 million lower than in 2017/18.”

I pay tribute to my hon. Friends on the SNP Benches who fought so hard on behalf of their constituents to have Police Scotland and Scottish Fire and Rescue Service VAT scrapped. That was a fantastic result. However, the reality is that Scotland has suffered under this policy for the past five years. Will the Chancellor be bringing forward plans to return the £175 million that has already been paid? VAT should never have been charged: it was a vindictive measure imposed on Scotland by a Tory Government. Give Scotland back the £175 million to invest in our frontline services. Will Scottish Tory MPs join the SNP in standing up for Scotland, or will they remain silent on the cash grab we have seen from Westminster?

This Tory Government’s austerity policies disproportionately affect the most disadvantaged individuals, while giving tax breaks to the better-off in society. The Resolution Foundation recently estimated that the Government’s austerity programme will leave the poorest third of households an average of £715 a year worse off by 2022-23. In Scotland, we have a new progressive income tax policy. [Interjection.] I can hear Conservatives saying, “Up”, but the reality is that for most people in Scotland tax is lower. The Scottish Government are able to reverse this year’s real-terms budget cut inflicted by this Tory Government, and ensure that the majority—I repeat, the majority—of taxpayers in Scotland pay less than in the rest of the UK.

However, Scotland’s new taxation powers should not exist simply to mitigate UK Government austerity. In Scotland, the SNP Government have gone further to support those on low incomes. In the recent budget at Holyrood, a package was secured that raises the threshold of a guaranteed 3% increase for those earning up to
As we near the EU summit at the end of this month in Brussels, the progress of this Government in readying for Brexit has been nothing short of shameful. The UK Government’s own analysis tells us that, under all scenarios, Scotland would suffer a relatively greater loss in economic output than the United Kingdom as a whole. A no-deal scenario would be significantly devastating, threatening to reduce growth by a massive 9% over 15 years.

Make no mistake: a hard Brexit is going to hit the pockets of families and lead to a loss in tax revenue expectations, and is therefore going to affect spending on public services, yet the Chancellor is silent on the risks to our economy—risks to our economy when the stresses and strains of a near decade of austerity are hurting. The fact is that Scotland is shackled to a sinking ship.

The Scottish budget passed last month illustrates the real divergence in political choices across the UK. In Scotland, we have chosen to stand by our outstanding public sector staff and give them the pay increase they deserve. We continue to mitigate the worst atrocities of this Government’s ideological austerity agenda. We will continue to press for nothing less than continued UK membership of the single market and customs union to prevent the economic catastrophe of an extreme Tory Brexit. We will never stop fighting to get justice for the 1950s women, whom the SNP are so happy to support.

In conclusion, the choices are clear and the opportunities obvious. The Chancellor must wake up to the economic injustices he has overseen, and he must tell this House as a matter of urgency how the economy will stand a hard Brexit.

Mr Hammond: Probably a matter of rather more immediate urgency for the people of Scotland is how their economy will withstand the highest rates of taxation in the United Kingdom—an economy that, under the SNP Government, is already growing more slowly than the economy of the United Kingdom. I do not know about a sinking ship; I suggest to the right hon. Gentleman that this is about keeping afloat.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about earning. I suggest that he looks at real household disposable income, which, as I am sure he knows, is now 4.4% higher than at the start of 2010. We have cut taxes for 31 million people across this country, at a time when his Government are putting taxes up. We have taken 4 million people out of taxation, improving the ability of people to retain their hard-earned incomes.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about Brexit, spreading alarm, but he knows very well that my right hon. and hon. Friends will be able to think of another adjective to describe a Government who pursued a ridiculous course of action.

Mr Speaker: Order. I gently remind the House that, whatever impression might have been given so far, this is not a debate; it is a question and answer session following a ministerial statement.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor on his balanced approach. He and the Prime Minister have rightly identified housing as an economic and social priority. He will be aware that the Treasury Committee’s report on his autumn 2017 Budget recommended that the housing revenue account borrowing cap could be lifted to allow local authorities to play their part in building the right homes in the right places. Is that something he will consider?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. We have already relaxed the borrowing cap for local authorities in areas with high demand and low affordability. We will monitor the consequences carefully and keep how it delivers under continuous review.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The light that the Chancellor can see at the end of the tunnel is the Brexit locomotive barrelling headlong towards him, and towards our schools and hospitals. What will he do to prevent that free trade agreement-style scenario, which his own Treasury officials say will leave a £55 billion train wreck in our public services?

Mr Hammond: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am committed to delivering a Brexit that protects British jobs, British businesses and British prosperity, and I spend a significant amount of my working time ensuring that that is the route we follow. I expect that we will make further progress at the March European Council. I understand the concerns that he expresses on behalf of British businesses, but I talk to businesses all day, every day, because that is my job. [Interruption.] The shadow Chancellor says so does he, so he will know this already. Business is concerned about what the consequences of a bad Brexit deal could be, but business is much more concerned about the consequences of the policies advanced by his right hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I say what a huge pleasure it is to hear the Chancellor so upbeat, and indeed Tiggerish? He has a right to be so, given that unemployment is at its lowest level for 40 years, and manufacturing is seeing
its best performance for 50 years. Given his answer to our right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) on looking at every avenue for money, and given that we will be about four months away from our official departure date, at the next Budget will my right hon. Friend consider setting out in the Red Book what he plans to do with the money that we will no longer have to pay in contributions to the European Union?

Mr Hammond: It is always a pleasure to hear from my right hon. Friend. We are absolutely not complacent, because there are many challenges as well as opportunities ahead of us, but we have a plan to embrace the opportunities and rise to the challenges. This country has many advantages that our neighbours would give their right arm to enjoy. We must go forward robustly and in good heart to seize those opportunities and make the best of them for the future. On his specific point, of course in the forthcoming Budget we will look at taxation and spending over the future period. The OBR, of course, will decide what to present in its report to the House. He will have an opportunity to question OBR officials about their approach when they appear before the House shortly after the Budget statement.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Consumer credit has risen by 9% over the past year, and the ratio of household debt to income, at 138%, is rapidly approaching a level not seen since before the financial crisis. With interest rates now forecast by the OBR to rise faster than we previously envisaged, are we not asking consumers to keep the wheels on the road for the economic recovery? Is that sustainable, and is that the right thing to do?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. It is something we keep under constant review, and I talk regularly with the Governor of the Bank of England about personal debt. She will probably know that personal household debt rose in all but one of the 13 years of the Labour Government, and it is now lower than it was before the financial crisis. The judgment of 13 years of the Labour Government, and it is now lower than it was before the financial crisis. The judgment of personal household debt rose in all but one of the 13 years of the Labour Government, and it is now lower than it was before the financial crisis. The judgment of the returns to investment in human capital are not as well developed as they should be. That is something the ONS has to take forward, but it is important, as we move increasingly into a knowledge-based economy, with a huge set of technological changes ahead of us, that we can compare appropriately and objectively investment in physical infrastructure with investment in human capital, and that is what we will be able to do if we get the new metrics right.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Chancellor of the Exchequer is doubtless aware that the OECD this morning published its own growth forecasts, putting us at the bottom of the OECD economies, with forecast growth this year of 1.3%. It is pretty clear that there is no Brexit dividend on the scene for the British economy. It is to be welcomed that the deficit is getting back to a manageable level, but he must know—even his own Back Benchers are telling him—that extra money is needed now for our hospitals, our schools and our police. That money is not there because of previous decisions to make premature cuts to capital gains tax and inheritance tax. He must have heard the Institute for Fiscal Studies calling for increased capital investment in housing, up to 3% of our economy. Why does he not listen to the IFS?

Mr Hammond: First, the right hon. Gentleman knows, as I do, that our economy still faces uncertainty as we go through the negotiation process with the European Union. I am convinced, from every conversation I have had with business leaders and investors, that as we deliver greater clarity about our future relationship with the European Union over the coming months, we will see business investment and consumer confidence increasing.

Rachel Reeves: But if we beat the forecast in 2017, let us beat it again in 2018. I do believe that economic growth matters. The shadow Chancellor says that it does not matter what the level of GDP is, but I do not agree—[Interruption.]—Well, I will send him the quote if he cannot immediately recall what he said. I do believe that GDP matters, because it is what drives living standards. We are putting extra money into public services—£11 billion since I have been Chancellor. I agree that we have a major challenge in the housing market. We have put a significant amount of money—£44 billion—into dealing with the challenge over the rest of this Parliament, but there are significant non-financial constraints on being able to do more, such as physical bottlenecks in relation to skilled labour and materials. But it is something we will keep under review.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Perhaps the current Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer could remind the previous Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer that, given where our electoral support comes from, it might not be wise politics to impose a targeted new tax on our older supports. He could also remind our right hon. and learned Friend that he will be delighted to know that after we leave the EU we will be saving £12 billion a year in contributions.

Mr Hammond: I assume that my hon. Friend is referring to the previous Conservative Chancellor but one, in which case I think our right hon. and learned Friend has probably heard him.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The winter crisis in the NHS left us with cancelled operations, ditched targets, patients sleeping on the floor, and a public apology in the end from the Prime Minister. Neither the spring nor the spring statement
has provided any easing of those pressures. Given that
the right hon. Gentleman knows the November Budget
will be too late to provide any additional funding that
he knows both the NHS and social care will need for
next year’s winter crisis—he knows this both in his
heart and in his spreadsheet—will he now follow the
Prime Minister and announce a public apology to the
staff and patients of the NHS who are going to have to
endure next year’s crisis because of this failure?

Mr Hammond: I have already made it clear that we
admire greatly the work of ‘NHS staff’ who, with the
pressures of flu and extreme winter weather, faced
extremely difficult circumstances this winter. This is a
spring statement, not a fiscal event, but I have said and I
will say again to the right hon. Lady that we are putting
an additional £4 billion into the NHS in 2018-19, and I
have committed to putting in further money in-year in
2018-19 to fund a pay settlement for nurses and “Agenda
for Change” staff, if the management and the unions
reach an agreement.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): It is very welcome to
hear from the Chancellor such good news on debt and
growth, in particular their effect on the real lives of
people in my constituency, where since 2010 youth
unemployment is down 48% and apprenticeships are up
6,850. In continuing his successful balanced approach,
will he commit to dealing with the social care sector,
because we both know it will become an increasingly
important issue in the years and decades ahead?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend,
who has done a great deal of work on this issue. We are
absolutely aware of the pressures on the social care
system. They are not short-term pressures; they are
driven by the demographics of an ageing population.
We have to do three things. In the short term, we have
provided additional money. In the spring Budget last
year, I put in £2 billion of additional support. My right
hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing,
Communities and Local Government put in another
£150 million of social care grant at the local government
settlement just a few weeks ago. In the medium term, we
do not want to work to get all authorities meeting the standards
of the best. There is excellent practice across the country,
but it is not everywhere. The variation in delayed discharges
between different authorities is completely unacceptable.
In the long term, we are committed to publishing a
Green Paper on social care and the future of social care,
which we will deliver to the House before the summer
recess.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Chancellor
says that forecasts are there to be beaten and I agree
with him, so can he explain to me why, since his Budget
in November, the OBR has not been able to increase the
growth forecast for 2019, 2020, 2021 or 2022? It cannot
be the negative impact of Brexit, because the OBR still
does not have the information from the Government to
be able to forecast that, so what on earth is his excuse?

Mr Hammond: I will perhaps remind the hon. Lady
that the OBR’s autumn report in November was only
four months ago and that in the normal course of
events one would not expect, in the absence of some
shock to the economy, economic forecasts to change
very significantly. The front-end forecast has changed,
because the outturn for 2017-18 has changed. The OBR
forecast growth 0.2% lower than it turned out to be in
2017-18 and that has a knock-through effect, which has
increased its growth projection for this year.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Investing in
our economy creates jobs and growth, and successful
businesses drive that. Will my right hon. Friend tell the
House how much the corporate tax take has gone up
since the cut in corporation tax? Will he confirm that he
will do nothing to hinder our internationally competitive
corporate tax rates?

Mr Hammond: Yes, I can. I am happy to tell my hon.
Friend that since we reduced the rate of corporate tax
to 19%, the yield—the amount of tax we raise for our
public services, our hospitals and schools—has gone up
54%. It is clear that being one of the most competitive
tax jurisdictions in the G20 is one of the determining
factors in many investment decisions coming to the
UK, creating the jobs and prosperity we need for the
future.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Chancellor
is right to talk up the UK economy when there is good
news, because there are plenty in this House who will
recklessly talk it down. There was, however, one gap in
today’s statement. He promised an inquiry, in time for
the autumn Budget, into air passenger duty and VAT
on the hospitality industry. When will he make an
announcement on when that inquiry will start and on
the terms of it?

Mr Hammond: I have laid a written ministerial statement
today that sets out the reviews and consultations, and
that is among them. If the right hon. Gentleman looks
at that after this statement he will see that it is there.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I
draw the attention of the Chancellor to the recent
research published by the International Monetary Fund,
which shows that the choice we made in 2010 to deal
with the deficit primarily by controlling spending rather
than raising taxes, as the Opposition would have done,
was the right choice? It meant that the economy grew
faster than those of our European neighbours, which will be affecting
their economies and societies not just for a few more
years but for 30, 40 or 50 years to come. It was the right
decision. We have executed our plan and we should
stick to it.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Chancellor
has been very upbeat today, but why is he so upbeat
when the growth figures show that we have gone from
being near the top of the G7 and the G20 growth lists to
the bottom of both?
Mr Hammond: I am clear—I think I have alluded to this already—that one of the factors depressing the forecast growth is the uncertainty that still exists around the economy. If the hon. Lady, like me, expects that uncertainty to dissipate over time, she should look through it to the fundamentals of our economy and its underlying strengths. This economy is in a fundamentally good shape. Once we can restore confidence and certainty about our future path, I am confident that those fundamental strengths will deliver increased economic growth.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My right hon. Friend made a fantastic statement. Does he join me in welcoming the 65% fall in youth unemployment in South Suffolk since 2010? Does he agree that while my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) is entirely right to mention inter-generational fairness, the worst form of intergenerational unfairness would have been to allow our youth unemployment to peak at socially dangerous levels, as it has in the rest of Europe?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I welcome the very large fall in youth unemployment in his constituency, but that will be from a base that was very much lower than what has come to be considered normal by many of our European neighbours. As he rightly says, this is not just an economic factor, but a societal factor. Persistent high levels of youth unemployment have a hugely damaging effect, as we have discovered in the past in this country to our cost. If someone is unemployed during their formative years, they are far more likely to remain unemployed and unemployable for the rest of their working lives.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is astonishing that Brexit, the single biggest risk to the economy, merited only two sentences in the Chancellor’s otherwise uneventful spring statement. If the economy and economic outlook are so rosy, perhaps he can explain why almost every school in my constituency is facing budget cuts, why my local NHS trust is in special measures, and why, when my constituents are crying out in the face of one of the worst waves of burglaries we have ever seen, the police are not responding because the Metropolitan police is subject to real-terms budget cuts. Is that not the grim reality facing our country, and is it not set to get worse because of the hard Brexit course his Government are following?

Mr Hammond: No. The Government are pursuing a Brexit that protects British jobs, British businesses and British prosperity, as the hon. Gentleman well knows. We have protected school funding so that it will rise in real terms per pupil over the next two years, and as we move to the fair funding formula for schools, every school will receive a cash increase. The police settlement on which the House recently voted provides £450 million of additional resource for police forces across the country. We have protected police budgets since 2015.1

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): The OBR’s report—I refer to table B.7 and chart B.4—assumes that the Brexit dividend will be recycled into ordinary expenditure. I wonder whether the Chancellor accepts that conclusion. If so, what thought has he given to spending this money, and is the NHS near the top of his list?

Mr Hammond: As I suspect my hon. Friend knows well, this is the assumption that the OBR has adopted at the last three fiscal events. It has assumed that any saving from a lower contribution to the European Union will be recycled to fund things that would have been funded by the EU, but will no longer be so. How we choose to use that money and what our priorities are will, of course, be an issue for this Parliament, but we should note that we have already made certain commitments—to our agricultural community, for example—to maintain spending at EU levels until the end of this Parliament.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I have to say that the levels of hypocrisy from the Government are quite extraordinary. How can the Chancellor pledge to be improving air quality while simultaneously boasting of undertaking the largest road building programme since the 1970s? How can he say that the plastics crisis is urgent and then propose a deadline for the elimination of plastics in a quarter of a century’s time? Where is the latte levy? Where is the deposit scheme? Where is the urgency for action? Why is there such a gulf between the Government’s action and words?

Mr Hammond: I am tempted to say, “Eeyore.” I think that the hon. Lady is making a fundamental mistake by linking the road building programme to air quality. I urge her to take at least a medium-term view of the world. The vehicle fleet is decarbonising. Certainly within her lifetime, if not mine, we will have fully electric vehicles, and probably autonomous ones as well. We should think of the road building programme not as a negative feature, but as an enabler in the transformation of how our vehicle fleet works. We have made announcements today, and I hope that she will be pleased with the consultation on VED for vans. This is a much-needed approach to incentivise van drivers to buy the cleanest and greenest vehicles available.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome the housekeeping dividend that my right hon. Friend set out in the spring statement, particularly with its focus on the cost of living and skills. In the forthcoming Budget, I ask him to continue that focus on the cost of living, to maintain the freeze in fuel duty, and to develop a skills strategy with the Department for Education to ensure that we meet the needs of the fourth industrial revolution.

Mr Hammond: If my right hon. Friend will forgive me, I will not make a commitment ahead of the next Budget on any specific tax or duty measures, but of course we will maintain the focus on the cost of living, to maintain the freeze in fuel duty, and to develop a skills strategy with the Department for Education to ensure that we meet the needs of the fourth industrial revolution.
Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): I cannot believe that the Chancellor did not have more to say about the NHS in this statement. The NHS in my area is not just in crisis, but at breaking point. He refers to putting an extra £4 billion into the NHS in the current financial year, but if we extrapolate what the OBR says that the NHS will need just to keep current standards of care going and to meet rising demand, we will need at least £30 billion extra going into the NHS by 2022-23. We need a solution that can subsist across Governments of different persuasions, so will he support the suggestion of the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) and others across both Houses have made for a proper, cross-party convention on how we put our NHS on a sustainable footing? Secondly, will he support the suggestion of the former permanent secretary of his Department for a proper, hypothecated NHS tax to help to give it the funding that it needs?

Mr Hammond: I suspect that now is not the moment for a long debate about the structural funding challenges of the NHS, but the hon. Gentleman is right. We have an ageing population. Technology is driving an ever-wider array of interventions that can and should be made to support people with medical conditions—particularly chronic medical conditions—and we have to look at how to ensure that our NHS remains sustainable in the future. Of course we are looking at that issue. I will not give him a commitment today at the Dispatch Box on how we will do that, but it is absolutely something that we need to do. I very much hope, as he suggests, that this could be done on a serious, cross-party basis, but I fear that his Front Benchers would not be able to resist the temptation to try to play politics with any such serious discussion.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It was excellent to hear the Chancellor talk about educational investment and our human capital. Further to the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), will he explain further whether the Treasury will create standards that will technically value human capital across our Government Departments? That can then drive decision making so that taxpayers’ money is best spent to maximise the human capital that we invest in so much through education and training, rather than being wasted.

Mr Hammond: We have asked the ONS to look at this and to consider the metrics that we could use. The objective is to be able to assess clearly where the marginal pound of capital investment should go to achieve the best effect on the economy. Without wanting to pre-empt the outcome of that work, I suspect that in the future, in a very rapidly changing economy, we will find that retraining and upskilling will be a very large part of our investment requirement.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Would the Chancellor be good enough either to meet me or send me a letter to outline the blockers to the Ayrshire growth deal, to which the UK Government have not yet committed?

Mr Hammond: It would be for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to have that meeting with the hon. Gentleman, but I am very happy to pass on his request.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend made any assessment of the Venezuelan economic model? It is so favoured by the shadow Chancellor? I understand the Venezuelan Government have made huge progress on reducing income inequality. Unfortunately, as is always the case with socialism, they have done so by pushing 80% of the population into poverty.

Mr Hammond: Actually, while watching Russia Today, I saw a very interesting piece on the Venezuelan economy—apparently everything is going swimmingly.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), the Chancellor suggested that our economy will be stronger once there is greater certainty over Brexit. Can he confirm that the Treasury analysis published last week showed that under all the Government’s Brexit options, long-term growth will be lower than it would otherwise have been? Does he not realise that that will be the true legacy of his Government and his party, which can no longer claim to act in the national economic interest?

Mr Hammond: Just to correct the hon. Lady on a couple of points, the report that she refers to, which was published by the Exiting the European Union Committee, was not done by HM Treasury. It was prepared, as I think she knows very well, by a cross-departmental group of Government economics professionals in response to the criticism that had been levied at the Treasury model that was used before the referendum. Of course it did not model the Government’s preferred outcome scenario; it modelled a couple of standardised outcome scenarios that the Prime Minister has already rejected. We are not going for a Norway model or a Canada model. We are negotiating with the EU for a bespoke solution. When we have made progress in those negotiations, we will model the outcome that we expect to get, and when Parliament comes to vote on this issue—hopefully later this year—it will have in front of it the output of that modelling.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his upbeat performance, and on standing up for the economy and our country. As a former soldier, may I put in a plug for our armed forces?

Mr Hammond: As a former Defence Secretary, I yield to no one in my admiration for the armed forces. I understand the challenges that defence faces and the complexity of the defence budget, with its many long-term projects operating at the cutting edge of technology. In case there is any misapprehension, however, I would like the House to be absolutely clear that defence will receive more than £1 billion of additional funding in each year of this Parliament. It has the fastest-growing RDEL—resource departmental expenditure limits—budget of any Department across Whitehall. We will, of course, continue to consider the specific needs of defence, but I would not like anyone to have the impression that, as I have read in some organs, the defence budget is being cut. It is not—it is being substantially increased.
Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Much is not under the Chancellor’s control, but the subject of my question is. One year ago, we were promised that Making Tax Digital would be put back to help small businesses, but in the intervening time — since the election — very little progress has been made in the countryside on broadband roll-out, so will he please consider putting it back by another year for small businesses?

Mr Hammond: No. We made our decision to defer Making Tax Digital mainly because there was a need for greater awareness among businesses and more time to prepare for the relevant software and so on. We are confident that businesses will be able to roll out the programme on the current schedule. Although I readily accept that there is some disquiet among potential business users, I also confidently predict to the hon. Lady that once they have got used to it, they will find that it is hugely beneficial to them, and that it saves them a lot of time and angst in their dealings with HMRC.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Since 2010, the minimum wage has increased from £5.93 to £7.83 an hour — a rise of 32%. At the same time, the take-home pay of someone on the minimum wage has gone up by 37%, thanks to the increase in the income tax threshold. Will the Chancellor join me in welcoming the fact that the Government have directed assistance at those on the lowest earnings, and will he assure the House that that excellent approach will remain at the heart of the Government’s strategy?

Mr Hammond: We are focused on the needs of those on the lowest pay who are in the workforce. Making work pay, particularly low-paid work, is a priority. I repeat what I said in the statement: partly as a result of the introduction of the national living wage and its subsequent increase to £7.83 an hour, income inequality in this country is now lower than at any point under the last Labour Government. It is falling in this country while it is rising in all other G7 countries.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Today’s statement was an opportunity for the Government to ease the burden on care providers by offering a solution to the sleep-in crisis. Sleep-in shifts are an integral part of public services which the Government have a statutory obligation to provide. Have the Government ruled out paying directly and in full the six years of back pay to which low-paid careworkers are entitled?

Mr Hammond: I am not sure about the end of the hon. Lady’s question. Is she asking whether the Government have ruled anything out? The Government have not ruled out anything — we are still considering this issue. Of course these workers must have the pay to which they are entitled and which they should have been paid. What we are doing — the Cabinet Office is leading on this — is working with the key providers to see how best to deliver that in a way that does not have negative impacts on the provision of care.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Youth unemployment in my constituency has fallen by 55% under the Conservatives, which is fantastic news. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the last thing young people in Teesside need is a reckless borrowing binge to reverse that progress?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Over the past few years, parts of the country that have suffered for far too long from low employment and investment have seen increased investment — much of it foreign investment — as well as increased employment and rising wages. They absolutely do not need to take risks on the kind of policies that the shadow Chancellor is proposing, which would plunge us back into a place we have been before and have no wish to revisit.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): People doing the same job should be entitled to the same day’s pay, but the Chancellor continues to ignore the fact that his pretend living wage is not for under-25s, as 21 to 24-year-olds will earn £4.30 an hour; 18 to 20-year-olds £1.93 less; and apprentices a full £4.13 less. Why does he believe in state-sponsored age discrimination?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady will know, I think, that we also announced — again, this is due to come in in April — record increases in the youth rates of the minimum wage. We have had several exchanges in this Session about the importance of maintaining low levels of youth unemployment and about the devastating effects of youth unemployment — [Interruption.] I am sorry if she does not like this. The Government take advice from the Low Pay Commission about the impacts of different pay rates on employment prospects, and we balance the need to give people a fair wage with the need to maintain high levels of youth employment, in the interests of those people themselves and of our economy.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I welcome the projection that real wages will increase in the coming year, but that can continue in the longer term only if we improve our productivity. In that context, may I welcome not only what the Chancellor has said about human capital and long-term endeavour, but the improvements in productivity over the last six months?

Mr Hammond: Yes, and my hon. Friend is right to draw attention to two quarters of very good productivity data. I do not want to change policy or to pivot on the basis of two quarters’ data, because data can be revised, but we are starting to think that we might just be at the beginning of a turn in the trajectory of productivity performance in this economy.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Liverpool has many success stories, but 30% of its children are in poverty and our public services are under pressure as Liverpool City Council loses 68% of its funding. The whole economy is threatened by Brexit. What will the Chancellor do differently to address these injustices?

Mr Hammond: Obviously the best way out of poverty is to get people into work, and the proportion of workless households is at its lowest level since records began. The hon. Lady will know that 200,000 fewer children are in absolute poverty than was the case in 2010. We are focused on using our modern industrial strategy to drive economic growth across the regions of our country, and on working with the elected Mayors and the devolved authorities to ensure that the necessary
investment is made in all corners of the British economy to deliver the growth that is the only way to get people sustainably out of poverty and into well-paid work.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): May I congratulate the Chancellor on his progress to date, but ask him to consider investing in a long-term innovative strategy for transport infrastructure—road, rail, air and sea—in the south-west so as to drive productivity north and south of the peninsula, and to include a commitment to such a strategy in the Budget so that we build a great south-west to rival the northern powerhouse? We thank him for his support for the Peninsula Rail Task Force. It is welcome, but not enough.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend will have to think of a snappy name for that—if she can, please will she let me know?

We are investing already in the south-west, including, as my hon. Friend will know, in the crucial A303 programme—£2 billion in a vital transport artery feeding the south-west. I know that many of the bids to the housing infrastructure fund come from south-west authorities, and we are acutely conscious that as we ask authorities to build more homes, we must provide them with the resource to build the supporting infrastructure—that is the purpose of the fund. I hope that she will get some good news when my hon. Friend the Housing Minister makes announcements in due course.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The number of apprenticeship starts plummeted after the botched introduction of the apprenticeship levy last year. I welcome the additional support for apprenticeships in small businesses that the Chancellor has announced today, but does he recognise that to get anywhere near the 3 million target by 2020 will require much more radical action, and will he return to that at the time of the Budget?

Mr Hammond: Our target—our commitment—is to deliver 3 million apprenticeships by 2020. The introduction of the apprenticeship levy changed the game, and we were always anticipating that it would have an impact on the profile of starts. The additional £80 million announced today is targeted specifically at small, non-levy-paying businesses to help them to take on apprentices. In a couple of weeks, at the beginning of April, large businesses that pay the levy will be allowed to transfer 10% of their levy funds to small businesses in their supply chain to support their engagement and training of apprentices. We will, however, keep the programme under close review. This is a commitment that we must deliver, and if we need to intervene in a different way to deliver it, we will.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): According to page 193 of the OBR report,

“The future is uncertain and the likelihood of unexpected...political developments means...there are significant...downside risks to...forecasts for the public finances.”

Does the Chancellor see any of those political downside risks sitting directly in front of him?

Mr Hammond: Yes. As I said earlier to an Opposition Member, in conversation, businesses—[Interruption.] Perhaps I should just sit down while the shadow Chancellor conducts his own conversation.

As I said earlier, businesses, in conversation, identified two risks about which they were concerned: the risk of a bad Brexit deal, which will have an impact on our economy, and the risk of the right hon. Gentleman ever getting his hands on any of the levers of power in our economy. Of those two, there is no doubt that business—as represented in the voice of Paul Drechsler this morning—regards the risk posed by the right hon. Gentleman as by far the bigger.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Chancellor has claimed that spending on disabled people has gone up, but we know that next month cuts in social security will hit them the hardest. He has also spoken about apologies. Would he like to apologise to the millions of disabled people whom he blamed for low productivity?

Mr Hammond: Of course I did no such thing. [Interruption.] No, I did not. We spend more than £50 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions. That is a record high, and we have spent £7.5 billion more in real terms since 2010. As a share of GDP, our public spending on disability and incapacity is the second highest in the G7. It amounts to 2.5% of our GDP and to 6% of all Government spending.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): My right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) announced that the fair funding formula would be introduced in a way that would protect per capita spending per pupil, and we would guarantee that every school would receive a cash-terms increase. That guarantee stands today.¹

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor talked about the increasing number of children being taken into care. In Liverpool, there has been an 11% increase in the past 12 months alone. Local authorities in the north-west wrote to the Chancellor last month calling for additional funds to address the growing crisis in children’s social care. May I ask him to address that growing crisis, and to do so as a matter of urgency?

Mr Hammond: As I said earlier, spending on support for the most vulnerable children has increased by £500 million since 2010. There is a distinction to be drawn between services provided for the most vulnerable children—children in care, children in the adoption and fostering process, and children at risk—and the wider children’s services budgets. The shadow Chancellor has made that point several times over the past week or so. Let me repeat, however, that we are giving local authorities

¹[Official Report, 24 April 2018, Vol. 639, c. 8MC.]
and it is for them to decide how they allocate those funds.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): There can be no truer test of a Government's commitment to fairness than their commitment to the next generation, and I know that the 7,110 young people who started apprenticeships in Redditch under this Government would agree with my right hon. Friend. Can he say more about the funds that he has set aside to help more small businesses such as those that I visited last week to access apprenticeships, and does he agree that the best place for his construction skills village is Redditch, a new town in the heart of the country?

Mr Hammond: I am glad to be able to tell my hon. Friend that there will be 20 construction skills villages. We look forward to the bid from Redditch, and I am sure that it will be considered carefully.

As I said earlier, my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary is contributing an extra £80 million specifically to help small businesses that are non-levy payers with the costs of engaging apprentices, and from April many small businesses will benefit from the flexibility that allows large business levy payers to transfer 10% of their levy funds to small businesses in their supply chain. The impression that I have from talking to the CBI and other organisations is that businesses are keen to do that, and many of them will make such transfers.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Is the OBR right to calculate in its report that the United Kingdom will be making payments to the European Union until 2064 as part of the divorce settlement and that that will not include any new commitments that the British Government may make in the remaining parts of the negotiation? Would it not be better just to stay in the EU?

Mr Hammond: The payment profile has three parts. There are payments during the two years—more or less—of the implementation period; there are payments as the EU dispenses the so-called reste à liquider over the following few years; and then there is a very long tail as the EU pays out the so-called reste à liquider over a longer period. There are payments during the two years—more or less—of the implementation period; there are payments as the EU dispenses the so-called reste à liquider over a longer period.

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Mr Hammond: Yes. Local government, local people and local businesses understand best how to grow the economies of their regions. I welcome the initiatives that my hon. Friend has mentioned. I am aware of the garden village, and I look forward to perhaps being able to visit it in the spring.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Is it not true that young people in our communities are paying the biggest price for this Government’s choices and failures? Local government faces a funding gap of £5.8 billion by 2020. The income of my local council, Hounslow, has been cut by 40% since 2010, with more to come. There are 400,000 more children in poverty than five years ago, and in some wards in my constituency the proportion is now hitting 40%. The Chancellor asked to be judged on his record. Is that a record of which he is proud?

Mr Hammond: Yes, it is, because the figures given by the hon. Lady are not quite right. There are 200,000 fewer children in absolute poverty than in 2010. [Interruption.] Absolute poverty is the relevant measure. The crucial point is that these figures are around that, after the financial crash in the last Labour Government, we could have gone down a route that many of our continental neighbours went down, which would have seen hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of young people cast on the scrapheap of unemployment and left there potentially for decades. We did not go down that route, and we have seen youth unemployment in this country relatively low and falling, and that is a huge benefit to the next generation, who will be able to benefit from their engagement in the workforce and, as they go forward, from rising living standards.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement and the balanced approach to the economy he detailed. I particularly welcome the attention on digital and skills, as these are the main issues businesses are raising with me, and I hope Yorkshire will be one of his local full fibre allocations. Will he continue to focus on fibre and digital as critical to boosting our national productivity?

Mr Hammond: Yes, if we do not have these enabling network technologies—a good fibre-optic backhaul network, good digital technologies—we will not be able to exploit the technologies of the fourth industrial revolution, and we must do so.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Office for Budget Responsibility says that real earnings growth for the next five years is expected to remain subdued, averaging just 0.7% a year, and real household disposable income per person is expected to average only 0.4% per year. So why will the Chancellor not properly fund his Departments to ensure that the public sector pay freeze is properly lifted, as has been done in Scotland?

Mr Hammond: The public sector pay freeze has been lifted: we have removed the 1% cap, so it is up to departmental Secretaries of State to make appropriate recommendations and provide appropriate evidence to pay review bodies. But we do expect them, where they recommend settlements above the level they are already funded for, to use workforce management measures and efficiency improvement measures negotiated with the workforce to ensure that over time increases are self-funded through higher efficiency and productivity.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Chancellor is right to focus on how the tax system might be used to encourage improvements in the environment, and I
[Mark Pawsey]

know that the packaging industry recognises the need to reduce waste and will respond positively to his call for evidence. I ask for it to include two things: first, that it is people who cause litter, and the Chancellor spoke about the need for behaviour change; and, secondly, will it recognise the important role packaging has in reducing food waste by keeping food fresh for longer?

Mr Hammond: Yes, of course, and the point of having a call for evidence is to make sure that the decisions we make are based on full knowledge and full information. My hon. Friend makes a very important point: it would be massively shooting ourselves in the foot to make a change in relation to packaging that then massively increased food waste and the energy cost of food that was wasted.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Why is the Chancellor refusing to share the light at the end of his tunnel with grieving parents who are struggling to pay for their children’s funerals? Their lives are forever blighted by darkness. A children’s funeral fund is the dignified, compassionate and sympathetic thing to do.

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady is a tireless campaigner on this issue, and both I and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister have heard her pleas on behalf of parents in this terrible situation. I am sure, however, that the hon. Lady recognises that this is not a fiscal event; there have been no fiscal announcements today, but I am absolutely certain that she will want to make a representation to me ahead of the Budget in the autumn.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I thank the Chancellor for his very spring-like statement, and it is good to hear that there is light at the end of the tunnel. What plans does he have to support our vital £90 billion creative industries sector, which is growing in my constituency of Clacton?

Mr Hammond: Creative industries is an increasingly important part of the UK economy, and one in which we have a significant comparative advantage, and the best way the Government can support the creative industries, apart from the obvious one of training and skilling, is through supporting the roll-out of digital technologies on which so many of the creative industries these days depend.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Chancellor’s constituency will have families on the national living wage, and I have many more. Does he agree with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which has demonstrated that a two-parent family with one working and two children will, because of tax credit cuts, be £450 a year worse off? That is not fair shares, is it?

Mr Hammond: The national living wage has given a pay rise of more than £2,000 a year to anyone in full-time work since it was introduced in 2015, and of course it is not just the national living wage; it is also the increase in the personal allowance, which means that people are now able to keep more of what they take home, and because it is an allowance, rather than a rate cut, it disproportionately benefits those on the lowest earnings.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Fourth industrial revolution technologies are transforming and boosting productivity across the whole country, particularly in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector. As my right hon. Friend considers future spending priorities ahead of the Budget, may I urge him to continue and accelerate support for our entrepreneurs and innovators, who create the wealth of the future?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is a tireless advocate of the technology that will fuel the fourth industrial revolution, and the important thing is that, while we are talking about it, this is actually happening across the country. These technologies are actually being used by large, medium and small businesses. They are not just something in the laboratory or the university classroom; they are actually happening in the factories and business parks across Britain, and they will transform the way we live and work.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I am sure the Chancellor will agree that it is not talking down the economy to report in this place the real lived experiences of the people we represent, the majority of whom will not see real average wage incomes exceeding the pre-crash levels until 2022. Does he not agree that all the measures announced today and the rhetoric will not make a difference to those who need it most until their average incomes increase above the pre-crash levels? When will that happen?

Mr Hammond: Real income growth is the principal target that we focus on, but the country suffered a recession after the financial crisis that wiped out 6% of our national income, and we are rebuilding our economy from that crisis, hindered and hampered by the fact that the previous Government were ill-prepared for the crisis when it came. As I have made clear today, we are determined to ensure that our economy and public finances are in good shape to deal with the economic cycle in the future, because we do not believe that we have abolished that economic cycle, and we have to prepare for future downturns because that is the nature of economic life.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I welcome the progress made in reducing the debt and the deficit, but will the Chancellor confirm that we are still spending £50 billion in debt interest—more than the armed forces and police force combined receive—and if we do not get control of this, there will be less money for the things we value, such as the housing infrastructure fund, Oxfordshire’s excellent submission for which is so important to my constituents?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is current spending; this is £50 billion that we could spend on hospitals, on schools, or, if we chose, on investment in infrastructure. The answer to this from the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) is to increase the amount of borrowing we have, and to increase the amount of money we are pouring down the drain every year on debt interest, reducing the amount of money available for our public services. That cannot be the right way to go.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): In spite of the claims for what will happen to real wages on April fool’s day, the fact is that real wages are now lower than in 2010,
and debt has grown twice as fast under this Government as it did under the previous Labour Government, in spite of the global economic crash in 2008. So does the Chancellor agree that his strategy is failing people like my constituents, who are suffering from £6 billion of cuts to social care? They can no longer get care packages so they can die at home surrounded by their loved ones, but instead are stuck in hospital.

**Mr Hammond:** I do not agree with the hon. Lady, and her numbers are wrong, as I am sure she knows. The soaring deficit in 2009-10 has created a legacy that of course was going to lead to increasing debt. Our challenge has been to get the deficit down so that debt can now start to fall, and as debt starts to fall, we are able then to fund our public services, invest in Britain’s future, and provide some relief for hard-pressed families and small businesses through easing their tax burden, and that is exactly what we intend to continue to do.

**Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): A number of hon. Members have mentioned the next generation. Is it not the case that only this Government’s approach can really deliver true intergenerational fairness, because the alternative is ever-increasing borrowing, which would be put on the shoulders of young people?

**Mr Hammond:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that point needs to be made more often. When the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington talks about borrowing an extra £100 billion, £250 billion or £350 billion—or whatever figure he is thinking about this week—and when he talks about nationalising an industry for £190 billion or whatever, he is talking about burdening the next generation with yet more debt that will blight their futures and limit their chances. That is not fair; it is not right, and we must make sure that he never gets the chance to do it.

**James Frith** (Bury North) (Lab): Some small businesses in Bury are still picking up the pieces following the Carillion collapse. Small business confidence in the north-west is at its lowest in four years, with UK skills shortages being blamed for some £3 billion of lost earnings. The Chancellor chose to come to the House today to give us this spring statement, yet he had nothing to say. We heard a fake news forecast with nothing for the real job creators. Will he give some certainty to the small businesses that are providing the jobs in towns such as mine, and will he stop this outsourcing to puffed-up vehicles such as Carillion, which appear to be too big to fail until the point when they do fail?

**Mr Hammond:** On the statement, the reason that I have come to the House to make this statement today is because the OBR has published its second report of the fiscal year. It is mandated by Parliament to produce two reports a year, and I think that the House would have regarded it as a gross discourtesy if I had published the report without coming to the House to answer questions on it. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned skills shortages. He will recognise that, while skills shortages are a serious problem, it is in a sense the better problem to have, rather than having skilled people looking for employment. The work is there, the jobs are there and the economic growth is there; we now have to respond to that by delivering the skills that people need.

On outsourcing, we will continue to pursue the best value for money for every pound of taxpayers’ money that we spend, and where that involves collaborating with the private sector, that is what we will do. The way in which we have handled the Carillion situation has ensured that public services continue to be provided and that the public purse has not had to bail out a private company.

**Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I should like to join the Scottish National party Finance Secretary in Holyrood in acknowledging the additional funding for Scotland’s block grant. The extra £479 million will mean a real-terms increase over the next few years. Given that Scotland’s GDP growth is forecast to be less than 1%, will my right hon. Friend commit to driving economic activity across all our constituencies through initiatives such as the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city deal?

**Mr Hammond:** Yes, but it is a pity that the SNP spokesman here did not feel inclined to acknowledge the same thing. My hon. Friend is right to suggest that there are a Government for the whole of the United Kingdom. It is not the Scottish people’s fault that they have a Government who are adopting policies that are depressing economic growth in Scotland and will depress it further in the months and years ahead. We will go on delivering policies that are designed to improve the economy across the whole of the United Kingdom, including the growth deals in Scotland.

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, it was revealed that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government returned £1.1 billion of unused housing money to the Treasury over the past two years. That money should have been spent on recladding tower blocks that were found to be unsafe after the Grenfell Tower tragedy. Will the Chancellor use his autumn Budget to fund the work that is required to keep our tower blocks and their residents safe?

**Mr Hammond:** My hon. Friend the Housing Minister and I have both made the point that local authorities and social landlords that have blocks that need recladding should carry out that work. Any work that is required for urgent safety reasons should be done, and any local authority or housing association that has a genuine inability to fund the work should get in touch with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which will work with them to find an appropriate solution. Safety-critical work must be carried out. That is the legal obligation of the landlord, and we will work with them to ensure that it is carried out.

**Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s continued commitment to increasing the housing supply. I would also like to put in a bid for Erewash in relation to the construction skills villages. Does he agree that measures such as the housing infrastructure fund and the cut in stamp duty for first-time buyers will help many of my constituents to realise their ambition and aspiration to get on to the housing ladder?

**Mr Hammond:** Yes, the housing investment package that we have put together is important, because it has ensured that financial support will not be the constraining
factor in building more homes in this country. We have other constraints—including skills constraints, land supply constraints and materials supply constraints—but finance will be available. The measure that I announced in the autumn Budget to remove stamp duty for 1 million first-time buyers will allow 1 million mostly young people once again to aspire to the dream of home ownership.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): On the Chancellor’s announcement on cashless and digital measures, he claims that he will ensure that cash will be available for those who need it. He further claims that his is the party of small business. If he stands by that, will he come to Nairn, Grantown and Aviemore to explain to businesses there why, with more than 70% of the shares in the Royal Bank of Scotland at his command, he is failing to block the closure of its branches? The Federation of Small Businesses says that those closures will make it more difficult to do business in Scotland.

Mr Hammond: It is absolutely always a pleasure to visit Nairn, but I have no immediate plans to do so. As the Prime Minister has told the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends on several occasions, we do not interfere in the day-to-day management decisions of the Royal Bank of Scotland—[Interruption.] Let us treat this seriously. The consultation that we published today is about cashless and digital payment systems, but it specifically acknowledges, as I said in my statement, that we also have to ensure that cash is available to people who need it. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the consultation when it is published, he will see that we are determined to address that issue. I hope that he will engage in that consultation.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The Chancellor is right to look at the impacts of the VAT threshold on business. It is a disincentive to growth and an incentive to avoid tax through cash deals. Does he agree, however, that registering for VAT does not just have financial implications—it also has an administrative impact? Would this be an appropriate time to look at the entire VAT regime?

Mr Hammond: I think that that would involve widening the scope of the intended consultation rather dramatically. I remind the House that, when I referred to this issue in the autumn Budget, I said that I was not minded to lower the VAT threshold because I recognise that, at its current level, it keeps a lot of small businesses out of the administrative burden of VAT. However, we are keen to ensure that the cliff-edge effect, which has a damaging impact on businesses that are trying to grow, should be addressed if it is possible to do so. The consultation will pursue those ideas.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): There is a reason why we need to invest in our public services. In York, our schools have gone from being the seventh worst funded to the very worst funded authority, our NHS is in a capped expenditure process, and no social housing has been built. Should not the Chancellor invest in our children and in the sick, and provide homes for the homeless?

Mr Hammond: I am afraid that it is characteristic of the Opposition that they are able to see the world only through the lens of inputs—

Rachael Maskell: That is the reality!

Mr Hammond: The reality is that since 2010 we have increased the number of schools that are good or outstanding. That means that 90% of schools are now either good or outstanding, and that 1.9 million more children are being taught in good or outstanding schools. That is the metric that matters to parents and to children themselves in terms of their life chances. It is not always just about the money; it is also about the outcomes.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I welcome the measures introduced by the Government to help the oil and gas industry, including a £2 billion package of support and the introduction of transferable tax history, which has been a much-needed shot in the arm. With the industry set to contribute over £1 billion in tax to the Treasury this financial year, will my right hon. Friend tell me what further steps the Government can take to support this vital sector?

Mr Hammond: We are committed to the oil and gas industry and, as my hon. Friend knows, to measures that will ensure that every drop of economically recoverable oil and gas in the UK continental shelf is recovered, which is in the interests of the Scottish economy, the UK economy and Her Majesty’s Treasury. I am delighted that the increase in the price of oil, together with the uptick in activity as a result of that rise and of the measures that we have announced, means that the oil sector’s contribution to the UK Treasury will again become positive in the year to come.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The Conservatives have cut the Welsh Government’s budget by around £1 billion a year since 2010, and the knock-on impact on public services in Wales and on Welsh local government’s ability to deliver key services has been huge. Will the Chancellor apologise for the failed Tory austerity that has caused so much damage to public services in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney and across the UK? Given his outlining of a rosy picture, will he set out his plan adequately to fund the public services on which many people rely?

Mr Hammond: I do not have the figures to hand, but if my memory serves me correctly, I was able to confirm at the Budget last year that Wales will receive over £1 billion of additional funding, including as a result of changes to the agreed formula. So funding is not down, but up. The failure of services in Wales, mainly in the Welsh health service, that we regularly catalogue across the Dispatch Box is a result of decisions made and priorities set by the Welsh Government, not the UK Government.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Economies move in cycles. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a moral case for ensuring that our public finances are in a state to help the poorest in society, some of whom live in my constituency, when the next slowdown comes? Does he also agree that the Labour party manifestly failed to take that approach?
Mr Hammond: It did. My hon. Friend is right. It is precisely because we have seen the devastating impact of being unprepared for a serious economic downturn following a financial crash that we are determined to ensure that the UK economy is robustly prepared for the next normal cyclical downturn, whenever it occurs. Such things are normal, they happen in everyday economic life, and we must be able to ride through them without damage to our economy and without the poorest in our society paying the price. The poorest always pay when Labour’s model fails.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Following the global financial crash, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act 2009, introduced by Obama, saw $800 billion of investment pumped into the US economy, leading to the most sustained period of growth. By contrast, the UK embarked on a sustained period of austerity, and UK growth is now half that of the US and the eurozone. Which was the right ideological choice?

Mr Hammond: The United States is in a different position from the United Kingdom. Sadly, we no longer operate the world’s reserve currency and are no longer able to borrow under the same conditions as the United States. Decisions on the United States economy are for the United States Administration. This Government have made the right decisions for the UK economy, and the benefit of those decisions—the outcomes that we are now beginning to see—demonstrates the case for them.

BILL PRESENTED

HOUSING AND PLANNING (LOCAL DECISION-MAKING) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

John Mann presented a Bill to remove powers of the Secretary of State in relation to the location of and planning permission for new housing developments; to give local authorities powers to establish requirements on such developments in their area, including requirements on the proportion of affordable and social housing; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March, and to be printed (Bill 181).

Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) (Amendment)

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

2.43 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prevent the Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Act 2009 from expiring on 11 November 2019.

It was on 10 November 1938 when the horrors of Nazi persecution began in earnest with the shameful episode known as Kristallnacht. Lives were lost during that terrifying “night of broken glass” but a key focus of the violent attacks that took place was property—the homes, buildings and businesses owned by Jewish people. Throughout the 1930s and ’40s, property of all kinds was systematically stolen from millions of people as part of Hitler’s horrific genocidal campaign against Europe’s Jewish community. That included many precious works of art. It is estimated that up to 20% of Europe’s cultural treasures were lost during world war two, and around 100,000 cultural objects pillaged during the Nazi era still remain hidden today. The horrific crimes of the Nazis can never be remedied, but there is action that we can take to return works of art to the people from whom they were stolen.

At the end of the last century, there was growing international awareness of the risk that looted art may have been inadvertently acquired by museums and galleries. That led to the 1998 Washington conference on holocaust era assets, where a number of countries, including the UK, pledged that they would work to identify treasures stolen by the Nazis and seek to return them to their rightful owners. Compared with other European countries, it seems that little looted art found its way to the UK, but that should not be an excuse for inaction.

In 2000, the previous Labour Government established the Spoliation Advisory Panel to consider claims from anyone who had lost possession of a cultural object in circumstances relating to the Nazi era. A problem arose in 2002, when the heirs of Dr Arthur Feldman sought the restitution of four old master drawings in the British Museum on the grounds that they had been stolen by the Gestapo from Dr Feldman’s collection in March 1939 in what was then Czechoslovakia. The British Museum wanted to return the objects, but the High Court ruled that it could not lawfully do so. No matter the moral case for giving property back to the heirs of its owner, the museum was under a binding statutory obligation not to give away items in its collection. Several other national institutions were also subject to the same restriction.

That and other similar cases were raised in Parliament in 2009 by Andrew Dismore, who was the MP for Hendon at the time. He brought forward a private Member’s Bill to remove the statutory restrictions on national institutions, such as the British Museum, that prevented them from returning works of art confiscated by the Nazis. With cross-party support, the Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Bill received Royal Assent on 12 November 2009. It provides that the 17 national institutions named in the legislation have the power to return works of art to their rightful owners in cases where that is recommended by the advisory panel and approved by the Culture Secretary.
However, section 4(7) of the 2009 Act contains a 10-year sunset clause, meaning that the Act will cease to have effect after 11 November next year. After that date, the institutions named in the legislation will no longer be able to return works of art to Holocaust survivors or to the families of those who perished in the genocide. The Bill that I am seeking leave to bring in would keep the legislation on the statute book by repealing section 4(7) and thus removing the sunset clause.

Parliament was entirely right in 2009 to give our national museums the power to restore property lost in such terrible circumstances to its rightful owners. The legislation was subject to exacting scrutiny and was significantly amended and clarified during its passage through Parliament. It has worked well during its eight years on the statute book, resolving cases in a fair and balanced way. Take, for example, the 12th century manuscript known as the Beneventan Missal. The advisory panel concluded that the manuscript had been looted during the chaos that followed the Allied bombing of Benevento in 1943, and, with the approval of the Secretary of State, the missal was returned to Italy. In 2015, a John Constable painting from the Tate Gallery was restored to its owner after the panel concluded that it had been stolen when the German army invaded Budapest in 1944.

The 2009 Act is a carefully targeted measure that applies to a defined and limited period and set of circumstances, so it does not open the door for more contentious claims relating to objects brought to the UK in past centuries and under different circumstances. The Act has not had a disruptive impact on our national museums. When the proposal to keep the measure on the statute book was announced in 2017, it was warmly welcomed by the museum community. Today the director of the National Gallery, Dr Gabriele Finaldi, issued the following statement:

“The museum community is committed to fair and just redress in the case of works taken wrongfully during the Holocaust and World War II. It is fully supportive of the proposal to amend the Act by removing the so-called sunset clause.”

The task of identifying and returning objects that have an incomplete history during the relevant period is by no means at an end. As recently as last September, the Government hosted an international conference in London to consider how efforts to identify and give back works of art lost during the holocaust could be accelerated. The UK has been at the forefront of global efforts to resolve those cases in a fair way, and the 2009 Act has played an important part in that. The 2009 legislation had the backing of the last Labour Government, and my proposed Bill has the support of the current Conservative Government. I thank the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for its work, which has included engaging with the Scottish Government with a view to securing their support to reflect the fact that Scottish institutions are included in the list in the legislation.

There may still be potential claimants who are unaware of the location of artworks owned by relatives who died in the holocaust, so the moral case for this legislation remains as strong today as it was eight years ago. Indeed, the case is arguably stronger than it was in 2009. We have fewer and fewer holocaust survivors still with us. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to all the survivors who live in my Chipping Barnet constituency. I have had the great honour of meeting many of them during my years as their local MP. I thank them for all that they do to ensure that the current generation hears their testimony at first hand, as part of the efforts we must make as a society to ensure that the horrors of the holocaust are never forgotten.

Surely, it would be heartless and wrong to deprive the last survivors of their right to recover treasured works of art. Nothing can make up for the trauma and suffering of those who experienced the holocaust at first hand, or who lost loved ones in that horror, but at least we can give them back the precious works of art that were stolen from them. That is what my proposal is designed to achieve, and I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,
That Theresa Villiers, Bob Blackman, Dr Matthew Offord, Stephen Crabb, Ian Austin, Mr Edward Vaizey, David Evennett, John Mann, Andrew Percy, Charlie Elphicke, Mr Iain Duncan Smith and Andrew Rosindell present the Bill.

Theresa Villiers accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April, and to be printed (Bill 182).


**Statutory Instruments (Motions to Annul)**

**UNIVERSAL CREDIT**

*Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):* We now come to the four motions on universal credit, children and young persons and social security, which will be debated together. I must inform the House that the Speaker has certified the two motions on children and young persons as relating exclusively to England, and as falling within devolved legislative competence. The motions relating to those statutory instruments are therefore subject to double majority voting, by the whole House and by Members representing constituencies in England. I should inform colleagues that this is a three-hour debate. It is very well subscribed; there are more than 40 Back Benchers wanting to speak. I hope that both Front Benchers and Back Benchers will bear that in mind.

2.55 pm

*Angela Rayner* (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an humble address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Universal Credit (Miscellaneous Amendments Saving and Transitional Provision) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 65), dated 22 January, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22 January, be annulled.

*Madam Deputy Speaker:* With this it will be convenient to discuss the following motions:

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Free School Lunches and Milk, and School and Early Years Finance (Amendments Relating to Universal Credit) (England) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 148), dated 6 February, a copy of which was laid before this House on 7 February, be annulled.

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Local Authority (Duty to Secure Early Years Provision Free of Charge) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 146), dated 6 February, a copy of which was laid before this House on 7 February, be annulled.

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Social Security (Contributions) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 120), dated 31 January, a copy of which was laid before this House on 1 February, be annulled.

*Angela Rayner:* I ask all Members of the House to bear in mind what Madam Deputy Speaker has said when they make interventions. I will try to be as brief as I possibly can.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), the shadow Chancellor, has said, this Tory Government have created a crisis on a scale that we have not seen before. Today, they did nothing to tackle it, and in these regulations they seek to make it even worse. If the House does not vote for our motions today, more than 1 million families will lose out. First, they will lose their free school meals.

*Chris Philp* (Croydon South) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree with Channel 4’s FactCheck, which says:

“This is not a case of the government taking free school meals from a million children?”

These are children who are not currently receiving free school meals, and in fact the Government’s proposals would see 50,000 extra children receive free school meals. Perhaps the hon. Lady could stop giving inaccurate information to the House.

*Angela Rayner:* The hon. Gentleman should know that his Government have introduced transitional arrangements, and we are clear that under the transitional arrangements, those 1 million children would be entitled to free school meals. With the regulations, the Government are pulling the rug from under those hard-working families.

In my own boroughs of Oldham and Tameside, a total of 8,700 children growing up in poverty are set to miss out. In the Secretary of State’s own area, the total is 6,500. So much for the light at the end of the tunnel that the Chancellor mentioned over the weekend on “The Andrew Marr Show”!

*Rebecca Pow* (Taunton Deane) (Con): Is it not right that money should be placed where it is most needed? That is where we need the most support. When universal credit is fully rolled out, it is absolutely a fact that 50,000 more children will be getting free school meals. It is not right to mislead about this issue.

*Mr Jim Cunningham* (Coventry South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this will make the working poor poorer and hit families deeply?

*Angela Rayner:* I am sure that the hon. Lady does not believe that I am trying to mislead the House. Let me be absolutely clear: many people, including MPs, wrongly believe that all children in poverty already get free school meals. That is not currently the case. But under the transitional protections under universal credit, those 1 million children would be entitled to the benefit. Through the secondary legislation, the Government are pulling the rug from underneath those families.

*Mr Cunningham:* Does my hon. Friend agree that this will make the working poor even poorer, in this day and age?

*Angela Rayner:* That is absolutely right—my hon. Friend did make a really important point. Those who currently get free school meals who were not part of
universal credit were in households on out-of-work benefits. If these regulations were to go through, the people on whom they would have the most detrimental effect would be those in work.

The current system would help more than 1 million more children than the plans we are voting on today. The former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), once wrote that universal credit—"will ensure that work always pays and is seen to pay"—yet under these plans, universal credit will mean that work does not pay for hundreds of thousands of families. Those just above the plans, universal credit will mean that work does not pay for hundreds of thousands of families. Those just above the threshold would be better off earning less.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): One of the biggest and most fundamental errors that the hon. Lady and her party are making is in their understanding of what transitional protection is about. I helped to design this, so let me inform her—[Interruption.] Perhaps Labour Members would like to listen as they might learn something. Transitional protection was designed to protect those moving from tax credits into universal credit so that they did not—if this would have happened to be the case—lose any money in the transition. It was not about increasing to the degree that she is talking about the numbers in receipt of free school meals. Under universal credit, more will receive free school meals than would have been the case under Labour’s plans.

Angela Rayner: The right hon. Gentleman acknowledges the fact that under the transitional protections many more in-work families would have received free school meals than will be the case under the Government’s secondary legislation. We hope that Conservative Members will help those hard-working families by ensuring that passported benefits do apply to them. We hope that Conservative Members keep saying that more than enough.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Some 27% of children in Lincoln live in poverty. Does my hon. Friend agree that this cliff-edge threshold might mean that some of those children might not get a hot meal one day?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree about that. [Interruption.] Conservative Members keep saying that we are scaremongering, but it is absolute fact that under the transitional arrangements that currently apply, as they do in my constituency, which was one of the first to roll out UC, free school meals do cover those applicants who receive universal credit. The regulations will remove that right for those individuals, which is scandalous.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent opening statement. Does she agree that the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) almost makes her point for her? He made it clear that this is about making sure that people who are currently in receipt of benefits and free school meals would not be worse off when they transition, in which case they are going to be worse off under these regulations—[Interruption.] He is making that case for her. For all the huff and puff from Conservative Members, one would have thought we would remember that this is about children and families who are living in poverty in work. We should be doing our utmost to help them, not having a semantic argument.

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

As I was saying, people should not just take our word for it. They should look at what the Children’s Society has said about those 1 million children who will not receive free school meals if the regulations come into force.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very persuasive case. In the Bradford district, more than 10,000 children who are living in poverty will miss out on free school meals, but Northern Ireland will be exempt from the same policy. Are not the Government putting their own political benefit before child poverty?

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which I will come on to later in my contribution. As I said, those who are just above—

Chris Philp rose—

Angela Rayner: You have had your chance, thank you. As I said—[Interruption.] Hon. Members have been told that more than 40 people want to speak in this debate, and I am trying to give way as best I can. The hon. Gentleman has already intervened once; I think that was more than enough.

Those who are just above the threshold would be better off earning less under these proposals. The Government are pulling the rug from under their feet, because once they earn above £7,400, they will be about £400 a year worse off for each child they have in school. So just when did the Government abandon the principle that work should pay? Perhaps the Secretary of State can tell us why she will be voting for a policy that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) said, is twice as generous in Northern Ireland as it will be for her own constituents?

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that although the Conservative party talks about making work pay, it completely demolished that with universal credit through George Osborne’s removal of work allowances, meaning that now work does not pay?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Universal credit has had add-ons and add-ons ever since the Government proposed it. That has made it very complex and, as I have outlined, work will not pay for some in receipt of it if these proposals go forward.

I would like to make a little more progress and address the issue of free childcare. Once again, the Government have a policy in transition—one that they are seeking to restrict. About 200,000 two-year-olds are currently eligible for 15 hours of free childcare, but there will be more than 400,000 two-year-olds in families receiving universal credit. Ministers have refused to say
how many children will be eligible under their policy, so will they finally do so now? I ask that because hundreds of thousands of children may lose out under their plans. Once again, some of the most vulnerable children are first in line for Government cuts.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): In this House, we all believe in an honest and balanced debate, so may we just hear from the hon. Lady that it is clear that 50,000 more children will be entitled to free school meals under universal credit than under the previous system, and that 7,000 more children will be entitled to the two-year-old free offer—it is more, not fewer?

Angela Rayner: The Government have plucked the 50,000 figure from their own consultation document, but it had no accompanying methodology, so I am not convinced. Indeed, that makes up less than 5% of those who are in poverty. The regulations would mean that those who would currently be eligible for support under the transitional protections this Government laid out for universal credit would have that rug pulled from under them—[Interruption.] Conservative Members can keep making faces, but those are the facts.

Once again, this creates a cliff edge for families in receipt of childcare, and the policy will squeeze the income of working families who are already struggling to get by. Under universal credit, they have to pay their childcare costs up front and then claim the money back. With childcare costs rising faster than wages, meeting these costs up front will make it impossible for many working families to make ends meet, so yet another barrier is put in their way. Only months ago, several Conservative Members asked the Chancellor to look again at the taper rate because it meant that work would not pay for low-income families. Today’s vote is on exactly this issue. When the Government have already made those families bear the brunt of their cuts, adding yet another burden is just wrong.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; she is being extremely generous with her time. The Labour party manifesto committed to extend free school meals to all primary school pupils. This is an additional extension of free school meals to a lot more children who are in secondary school. Will the hon. Lady please tell us how much that would cost and how her party would fund it if it was in power?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman will know that the “School Food Plan” that was published in July 2013 recommended that the Government looked into free school meals for infant and junior schools. The Labour party manifesto was clear that we would just extend that. It was unfortunate that the Government chose not to do as recommended, instead just giving it to infants. If Conservative Members would like to see our costings and manifesto, I am sure I could provide that, because there were many more costings in our manifesto than there were in the Conservative manifesto—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This is an extremely important and very serious debate. The hon. Lady has taken a lot of interventions. When she takes interventions, there is no point in just shouting at her; it is important to listen to her answer. The same will go for when the Secretary of State is speaking.

Angela Rayner: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Government are phasing out childcare vouchers as they transition to a policy of tax-free childcare, but that policy is simply not working. The introduction of tax-free childcare has been so shambolic that the Government fell 90% short of their take-up target, and spending was less than 5% of their projection. Instead, nearly £1 billion that was earmarked for childcare was returned to the Treasury. Yet the Government are still pushing ahead with their plan to phase out childcare vouchers, which will leave families hundreds of pounds worse off and directly transfer Government support to those who are better off.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): My hon. Friend may have seen written answers I have received from the Government showing that 10,000 of their own officials still use childcare vouchers, and the same number are signed up to a Ministry of Defence scheme. Does she agree that if Ministers will not protect their own officials, they should at least stand up for our armed forces?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The armed forces do a magnificent job for us and it is an absolute scandal that they will also be caught up in this and made worse off as a result of these measures.

Members from all parties will know that hundreds of their constituents have written letters and signed petitions to express their concerns about these policy changes, yet the Government continue to push ahead with them, and have tried to do so by the stroke of a ministerial pen. The only legislation that has come to this House is the regulations before us, which complete the phase-out for those who change employers after April. We have therefore called for a vote on the regulations, and we want to make it clear that if the House passes our motion, we are sending a clear message to the Government that it is time to think again and keep childcare vouchers available.

The regulations on universal credit apply new sanctions to those who are currently protected and cut the time period that claimants have to provide evidence. Despite the Government’s rhetoric on people with disabilities and mental health needs, it will be them who suffer. Charities have urged the Government to reconsider, with Mind saying that the regulations will “make the system harder to navigate at a time when people are unwell and most in need of support.”

Why is the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions ignoring those voices and making the system even harder for the very people the Government claim they want to support?

Self-employed people are the absolute bedrock of our economy. The Chancellor spoke of start-ups and new businesses in his statement earlier, but this legislation will make things harder for self-employed people. The TUC warns that a short start-up period for the minimum income floor could close businesses with the potential to become sustainable and profitable. The rules could discourage people from self-employment entirely. So, again, why is the Secretary of State making things so much harder for the people her Government claim
to support? We know that the self-employed are more likely to be on lower earnings than employees, yet in its recent welfare trends report, the Office for Budget Responsibility confirmed that the low-paid self-employed face a much tougher benefits system under universal credit. On average, those affected are set to lose around £3,000, so the savings seem to be coming from the pockets of the low-paid self-employed. Why is the Secretary of State pursuing a policy that will make so many self-employed people much worse off?

The regulations make the universal credit system even more complicated, with the introduction of the surplus earnings rule. As universal credit is based on the previous month’s income, a self-employed claimant could get substantially less universal credit than an employed claimant earning a similar annual income. Successive Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions have said that universal credit will be simpler and will make work pay, but once again they are proposing the opposite.

All these statutory instruments share a common theme: they are about the support that we offer to families and their children, particularly those already struggling to get by. I remember when the Prime Minister said that the mission of her Government was the acronym JAMs—I am starting to think that really it stood for “Just about May’s survival”. It was meant to be about those who are just about managing, yet under this Government, there will be JAMs today and there will still be JAMs tomorrow, because instead of helping them to get on and get by, the Government are making their lives ever harder. Today is a chance to say that enough is enough. I commend the motions to the House.

3.16 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): As the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) is on the Opposition Front Bench, may I start by congratulating her on her promotion? I am sure that she would have liked to have got it in happier circumstances, but none the less I welcome her to her role. I hope that she does not fall victim to the bullying culture of the Leader of the Opposition’s office, as the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) has.

Well, well, well, what a strange old topsy-turvy world we find ourselves in. Measures so strongly fought for and won by claimants, MPs, stakeholders and charities only months ago are now being opposed by the Opposition. These changes were proposed by the most vocal defenders of benefits, and they are now being obstructed. We in the Chamber should not be giving the public misinformation, but unfortunately that is what has been happening so far.

Last month, stories emerged from Opposition Members—particularly the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner)—that have been repeated today: namely, that our plans for entitlement to free school meals would deprive more than a million children. It took a “Channel 4 News” FactCheck to point out that no child who currently receives meals would lose their entitlement and that, in fact, some 50,000 more children would benefit under our proposals when compared with the previous system.

I understand that it is the nature of the Opposition to oppose, but the scaremongering and misinformation from the Opposition has surely reached a new low as today they seek to annul regulations that consist largely of changes that were introduced purely to support benefits claimants—changes that Opposition Members have themselves called for. All this after a recent intervention by the UK Statistics Authority, which made it clear that the claims made by Opposition Members about universal credit causing poverty, debt and eviction were not supported by the evidence.

Of course, the scale and nature of the change represented by universal credit means that scrutiny is inevitable and important, and I welcome that, but unsubstantiated and exaggerated claims about widespread problems caused by universal credit amount to nothing less than scaremongering. They cause claimants alarm and, in the worst cases, stop them getting the money that they are entitled to, yet we find ourselves here again, debating universal credit, with the same false alarms coming from the shadow Cabinet—only this time we are debating the very regulations that we have designed to address the legitimate concerns of Opposition Members and our stakeholders.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that claims should not be made when they are unsubstantiated. I have been asking parliamentary questions about the £50,000 increase that is in the consultation response, and I have received no facts about how the figure has been arrived at—none whatsoever. Will that be published, please?

Ms McVey: The numbers have been calculated and modelled by civil servants. These facts come from independent people and they can be relied on, unlike the facts that come from people who, as we have heard today, make it up as they go along.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend dispel some of the myths and scaremongering that have been put out by the Opposition and reassure my constituency, where universal credit is being fully rolled out, that those already in receipt of free school meals will not lose that eligibility?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is correct, and I thank her for adding that comment. She is right that that protection is afforded. In addition, as we go forward, more people will benefit from the measure.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ms McVey: I will carry on for a bit, and then I will gladly take some more interventions.

We are not just debating these regulations today, but trying to save them from the Opposition, who would be happy to destroy this extra support for our benefit claimants. Perhaps I should remind the House of some of the changes that are in these regulations and what benefits they will bring to claimants. After all, the policy underpinning these regulations has been widely debated and supported both inside and outside this Chamber. The regulations abolishing waiting days will help many claimants by, on average, £160, while reducing the time taken to receive the first monthly payment.
These regulations bring into effect the housing benefit transitional payment, which amounts to two weeks of housing benefit at the start of the claim. That is worth, on average, £333 towards helping claimants stay on top of their housing costs as they move into universal credit. These regulations increase the work allowances and are worth around £68 a year in further support for those who are striving to enter work.

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Secretary of State is attempting to provide a stout defence of the impact of universal credit. Why is it then that, only last month, her colleagues on Stirling Council proposed three years’ worth of mitigation against the impact of universal credit, worth more than half a million pounds?

**Ms McVey**: Actually, if the hon. Gentleman looks at this Government introduced in the Budget, he will see that it was a package of support worth £1.5 billion for the country. What we are doing is supporting people as best we possibly can. Additionally, these regulations fund temporary accommodation through housing benefit, which has been widely called for and unanimously welcomed by local authorities.

These regulations follow on from a host of other changes that we have already implemented, including making our telephone lines Freephone numbers, extending the maximum repayment period for advances from six months to a year, increasing the maximum advance that claimants can receive to up to 100%, changing the guidance to ensure that, when private sector housing claimants come on to universal credit, we know whether their rent was previously paid directly to the landlord and can ensure that that continues.

**Clive Lewis** (Norwich South) (Lab): Meaner even than the master in Oliver Twist’s workhouse, the Secretary of State seeks not just to stop the second helping, but to stop any meal at all. I ask her to come to Norfolk. If these changes go through, 12,500 children will be denied a hot midday meal. How does that square the circle in relation to making work pay? Please, can she tell us—anything?

**Ms McVey**: Unfortunately—I think that I was taught Actually, if the hon. Gentleman looks at these regulations, they bring in real and tangible benefits for claimants and that, as promised, we are making the changes necessary to continue to deliver universal credit safely and securely, with all the necessary support that claimants need.

I want to be clear about another thing, too, because Members have stood up during past universal credit debates to recount stories of cases where their constituents have reported difficulties with universal credit. Where that has happened, we have immediately sought to address the concerns, because it is vital to us all that we get this right, so that we can deliver the most modern, forward-thinking, flexible benefit in the world, and that is what this Government are seeking to deliver.

This benefit will be at the cutting edge of support throughout the world—that is what this Government are delivering.

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): On problems with universal credit, the Secretary of State will, I think, recognise that the last thing that families earning a bit less than £7,400 a year want is a pay rise, because if they get it, they will immediately lose their free school meals and be much worse off as a result. That is a very serious problem for work incentives, which used to be a big priority for her Department. Does she recognise that major problem?

**Ms McVey**: The right hon. Gentleman raises a fair point that I would like to address. By contrast, the other points that we have heard so far have been fabrication. He mentioned people earning £7,400. Actually, with universal credit, we are talking about people who will be bringing home somewhere between £18,000 to £24,000. He is quite right—[ Interruption. ] If Members will kindly let me finish this answer to the very pertinent question asked by the right hon. Gentleman, as this is now a personalised benefit where people will have their own work coaches, we will not seek to put someone in a less advantageous situation. Therefore, if people look at the money that is coming in and the extra support that is coming from school meals, they can see that we will not seek to do that to an individual. A work coach will be working with individuals to help them to progress in work, so that they are in a better situation.

**Chris Philp** (Croydon South) (Con): On work incentives, can the Secretary of State confirm that there have been two studies—one in December 2015 and another in September 2017—both of which showed that people on universal credit were more likely to get back into work than those people on the predecessor benefits? Therefore, this is helping to get people back into work.

**Ms McVey**: My hon. Friend is quite correct. Further studies show that people on universal credit are much more likely to look for work than people on jobseeker’s allowance—86% of those on universal credit, compared to 34% of those on jobseeker’s allowance. Under the legacy benefits came things that I am sure we all remember, such as the 16-hour rule, which trapped people on benefits. That will not happen under universal credit because it pays people to work, every hour that they work.

**Mr Duncan Smith**: My right hon. Friend is doing a fantastic job. She has pointed out the absurdity of the Opposition’s position, whereby they will now vote against the changes that will benefit those who most need them. Alongside that, they are now voting for a policy that would deliver free school meals to families earning £40,000 a year. Does not she think that the Opposition are for the few, not for the many?

**Ms McVey**: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. Perhaps these are honest mistakes by the Opposition; I am not sure. Under universal credit, people can be in work and not in work. Perhaps the Opposition do not understand the complexities of this system, which is helping people into work and then to progress at work. As my right hon. Friend said, if we allowed free school meals in every family on universal credit, those families...
could include parents earning £40,000 a year. As has always been the case, we support people on free school meals from families who are either not in work or in low amounts of work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Again, can we listen to the Secretary of State? It is fine if she wants to take interventions and she has indicated that she will take some more, but I do think that hon. Members should be a bit calmer.

Ms McVey: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately).

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Jobcentres in my constituency tell me with some passion that universal credit is really helping them to get more people into work. The Government have also listened to concerns about universal credit and are making improvements. Does it not baffle the Secretary of State and is it not bizarre that the Labour party is trying to block those improvements, when the Government are doing exactly the right thing?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is spot on, and the incredulity with which she says what the Opposition are stopping points out the ridiculousness of their position. Not only have we helped an extra 3.1 million people into work, but these regulations help the most vulnerable and will bring in an extra £1.5 billion of support.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ms McVey: I will carry on for a little bit more before taking more interventions from Opposition Members.

I turn to the Free School Lunches and Milk, and School and Early Years Finance (Amendments Relating to Universal Credit) (England) Regulations 2018. The Government have recently published their responses to two consultations on the earnings thresholds to receive free school meals under universal credit. The scope of these consultations includes entitlement to free school meals, the early years pupil premium and free early education provision for two-year-olds. The intention of these regulations is to replace the transitional criteria introduced in 2013. These transitional measures made all families on universal credit eligible for these entitlements—a move that was necessary so that no household should lose out during the early stages of the universal credit roll-out. Having fully considered all the responses to the consultation, the Department for Education laid these regulations before the House on 7 February to replace the temporary criteria with the new earnings threshold. This is what much of the debate has centred on so far. I hope that we have given clarity and the Opposition now understand why accepting these regulations would be so helpful to their constituents.

Catherine West: This change to benefits shows how untrusted the Government are on benefits. If they are trying to sell something good, they cannot, because they are so untrusted on benefits. If the system is so fantastic, why do 80% of people who come to see MPs get their benefits? Why should not the system just work? [HON. MEMBERS: “What?”] Some 80% of appeals for universal credit—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I help a little bit? Would hon. Members make short interventions? I want to ensure that all Members get in. The sooner we get this speech over, the sooner we can get to the Back Benches.

Ms McVey: It would be helpful if hon. Members did not just make up statistics and facts as they went along, as we just heard from the hon. Lady. Hon. Members should listen to us regarding the support that we are now providing to claimants. As I said, it is a topsy-turvy world. There was a ding-dong when the Opposition were calling for the changes. Now that we are introducing the changes, we are back to another ding-dong and they do not want the changes—but never mind.

I turn to the regulations concerning national insurance contributions and childcare. These regulations align the tax and national insurance treatment of employer-supported childcare, where parents opt into the new tax-free childcare scheme. They remove the national insurance disregard to new entrants to the scheme, once the relevant day has been set. They are vital to ensure that the tax system operates fairly and consistently and that the Government can target their childcare support effectively.

For many parents, being able to afford good-quality childcare is essential for them to work and support their families. That is why we are replacing the childcare vouchers with tax-free childcare, which is a fairer and better-targeted system. Tax-free childcare is now open to all eligible parents, who can get up to £2,000 per child per year to help towards their childcare costs. More families will be able to access support through tax-free childcare because only about half of employed working parents can access vouchers, and self-employed parents were excluded from vouchers. Therefore, 1.5 million families are now eligible for tax-free childcare compared with about 600,000 families currently benefiting from vouchers.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): Will the Secretary of State clarify something she said in relation to people getting pay increases that then perversely lead to them being worse off? She appeared to say that she would instruct personal trainers to put that right financially. I can hear a shudder going around benefits offices up and down the country at the idea that she has unilaterally said that if any constituent of ours faces being worse off? She appeared to say that she would instruct personal trainers to put that right financially. I can hear a shudder going around benefits offices up and down the country at the idea that she has unilaterally said that if any constituent of ours faces being worse off as a consequence of a pay rise, perversely, her personal trainers will compensate them for that loss.

Ms McVey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, because it allows me to explain that universal credit works on a tailor-made basis, so that the claimant will always be in contact with their work coaches to work out what is better, how progression would be better and why they would be taking reasonable work because it makes them better off. I am not saying this unilaterally. I ask all Opposition Members please to go to their local jobcentre and meet the work coaches, who can then explain how the system works.

In 2013, the Government announced the introduction of tax-free childcare as the successor to childcare vouchers. The passing of the Children and Families Act 2014,
which legislated for tax-free childcare, had cross-party support. Tax-free childcare is now fully rolled out, and the date for the closure of the voucher scheme to new entrants is April this year. This was set out in the 2016 Budget, giving two years’ notice. Parents receiving childcare vouchers can continue to use them while their current employer continues to offer the scheme.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Is not the bottom line that under the previous tax credits system people got 75% of their childcare costs but under universal credit they get 85% of their childcare costs, and they can work all the hours that they want to?

Ms McVeY: Universal credit is far more generous, as my hon. Friend points out. Up to 85% of childcare costs will be given to people who need it.

Under the childcare voucher scheme, the estimated cost to the Exchequer of forgone employers’ national insurance contributions is £220 million per year. This is paid to employers and voucher providers to administer the schemes, so it is not surprising that voucher providers are lobbying hard to keep the scheme open. However, we are focused on delivering a better childcare offer for working families. Tax-free childcare is simpler to administer for childcare providers, who will not have to deal with multiple voucher providers. These regulations will bring the national insurance contributions relief in line with the income tax treatment. They are an essential step in reforming Government childcare support to provide a fair and well-targeted system. Closing the childcare voucher scheme to new entrants will ensure that more Government support goes directly to parents and helps working families to reduce their childcare costs.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): With the consultation that the Government are carrying out on abuse of women, does the Secretary of State recognise the threat of financial control and abuse posed to women by the single payment? Would she be willing to consider making individual payments of child tax credits to the mother, and so on, the norm? Charities have demonstrated that women who are being abused will not apply for exception because they feel they will come under physical abuse.

Ms McVeY: The hon. Lady makes a good point, and that is why it is possible to split payments according to need. The devolved Administration in Scotland have the right to alter these rules and provide extra support. Should they wish to, but it is safe to say that payments can now be split, and we have listened to those concerns.

We are also listening to colleagues in Northern Ireland, who have raised specific circumstances relating to certain public sector service employers, and have committed to ongoing engagement with them to look at these issues, as tax-free childcare continues to roll out to replace employer-supported childcare. We have seen the success of 30 hours’ free childcare for three and four-year-olds in England, so we are committed to working with the Northern Ireland parties to administer childcare support of that kind in Northern Ireland, in the absence of an Executive.

For the reasons I have set out, annulling these regulations would deprive families and their children of the important and positive support that this Government are determined to offer and would have a range of very negative effects, so I call upon the House to oppose the motions.

3.41 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to these motions for the Scottish National party. I will use the bulk of my time on early-day motions 1004 and 921, as motions two relate only to England or England and Wales.

The universal credit regulations referred to in early-day motion 921 cover most of what was announced in the Chancellor’s autumn Budget, after months of negative headlines for the Government about universal credit. It was the Government’s big sell to their concerned Back Benchers, which was really not much. For instance, they reduced the waiting time before universal credit can be paid to recipients from six weeks to five, which was a welcome but very wee step.

Meanwhile, the Government also included more controversial measures such as changes to the rules on surplus earnings and self-employment losses, which come into force next month. They removed the automatic temporary exemption from work search and availability requirements for illness for claimants who have been found fit for work, and they reduced the time people have to register and supply evidence regarding a change in their circumstances from one month to 14 days.

The Government’s tweaks to the welfare system over the last eight years and the drip, drip, drip of cuts are slowly eroding the value and support it provides. It is completely unfair to expect people on low incomes to cope with the fact that their benefit will be frozen and fail to meet their costs of living, while the Government continue to add layers of punitive bureaucracy designed to trip them up. An individual financial sanction or one person missing the deadline for an increase in entitlement is of tiny financial value to the Department for Work and Pensions, but it is proportionally an enormous chunk of that person’s income. Yet this Government seem content to make these changes off the cuff, in the same way they tweaked the universal credit work allowance, which eroded its value, and the same way they tweaked personal independence payments, to stop people with severe mental health problems receiving the higher rate. It is underhand, and it is appalling.

I received an official warning recently that universal credit will be rolled out in my constituency next month. I have been working closely with my local citizens advice bureau to make sure there is a joined-up response to the issues as they unfold, as it has done in many Members’ constituencies. I am worried about the impact that the roll-out of universal credit will have on local employers and their employees, because the picture elsewhere has been disastrous. The continued roll-out of universal credit is having a devastating impact on claimants, with debt and rent arrears through the roof.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is speaking about the roll-out of universal credit. We had the roll-out in Redditch just a few months ago. I can assure him that, according to the manager of the jobcentre, who has worked there for 30 years—an independent person working day in, day out to help people—the roll-out is much better than any previous system. Maybe he would like to visit Redditch and speak to her.
Neil Gray: I have no reason to doubt what the hon. Lady says, except that the experiences of Members on the Opposition Benches are rather different. I point her and her colleagues to my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), who has been working tirelessly on this not only while he has been a Member of the House but while he was leader of Highland Council, when universal credit was first tested in Highland. He has been knocking against a brick wall trying to get the DWP to listen to the concerns that he has found in his area, and his experience is not the same as the one the hon. Lady says she has had in Redditch.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I intervene in response to the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who said how wonderful jobcentres are and how much work they do. I do not know whether she has had the same experience as me, but in my city of Glasgow, the UK Government have closed six jobcentres, and in my area of the east end of Glasgow, they have just butchered three out of four jobcentres. How can we go and find out how things are going in jobcentres, when her Government are busy closing them?

Neil Gray: I absolutely concur with my hon. Friend. Friend. who has been an assiduous campaigner to protect and save the jobcentres in his constituency. Even at this late stage and after some of their doors have closed, I hope that the Government may listen and finally provide a reprieve.

It is right that we acknowledge the knock-on effect felt by landlords, whose incomes are in turn being squeezed due to tenants falling into arrears because of successive cuts to universal credit. The SNP has continually called for the roll-out of universal credit to be paused and properly fixed. That is not about just reducing the wait time by a week for those receiving universal credit, but about restoring the original principles of universal credit, which have been cut back so far to their roots that they have been battered.

The UK Government’s woeful ignorance on this is shameful. The evidence of the social destruction caused by universal credit in its current form is clear from report after report by expert charities. Such social destruction is not masked by the line, repeated ad nauseam by the Government, that universal credit is getting people into work. It is not much good for people if this is just a shift from out-of-work poverty to in-work poverty. We know there has been a rise in the rate of in-work poverty, and we also know that 67% of children—I repeat, 67% of children—currently living in poverty do so in a family where at least one person works.

Catherine West: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that most housing providers have deep concerns about universal credit in general, and in particular about direct payments to tenants who have problems with such a relationship?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I just warn Members that we will have to have a five-minute limit. I do not want to start off with a four-minute limit, but we are in danger of going that way.

Neil Gray: I agree with the hon. Lady. Which is why we are looking to introduce some flexibilities in Scotland, where we have the minimal powers to do so.

The Government must open their eyes to the crisis that they have created for workers, people who are sick or disabled, landlords and tenants, and employers, and urgently halt and fix universal credit before any more of our constituents have to suffer. In Scotland, the Scottish Government are using some of their minimal new powers in this area to give people in Scotland more choice over the universal credit payments and enable them to manage their household budgets better. We of course want to do more, and we wish that the whole of universal credit had been devolved to allow us to do so.

Dr Whitford: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Secretary of State’s suggestion that women can apply for the exceptional alternative payment scheme is not enough? The evidence shows that this needs to be the norm.

Neil Gray: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. Again, I hope that the Government are looking at her private Member’s Bill, which is due to be given a Second Reading on Friday, and that they will do what is right and is needed so that all areas of these isles can bring about the changes that are required.

Turning now to early-day motion 1004 on the changes to national insurance contributions that come into force on 6 April, much of the comment in this area has been not about the regulations themselves, but about a policy underpinning one of the changes. That policy is the UK Government’s decision to introduce a new scheme to support parents’ childcare costs—tax-free childcare—and to close employer-supported childcare schemes to new applicants from April 2018. Parents will not be able to receive support simultaneously from both the current scheme and the new tax-free childcare scheme, but parents who wish to remain in the old childcare vouchers scheme will be able to do so while the current employer continues to offer such a scheme. There is no obligation to switch to the new scheme, but existing voucher schemes will be closed to new applicants from next month.

The delivery of affordable childcare is crucial for the development of children as well as for providing for families. Fundamental to that is that parents on low incomes need to be protected from the impact of enormous childcare costs. That is one of the major barriers to resolving the gender pay gap and the gender employment gap. Childcare continues to be expensive and inflexible.

We are deeply concerned about the UK Government’s plans to close the childcare voucher scheme to new entrants from April this year. The SNP wishes to support policies that deliver for parents, ensuring that they have the resources and flexibility they need to give their children the best start in life. The UK Government must support working parents by keeping the scheme going, alongside the tax-free childcare scheme, so that parents can choose what is most suitable for their needs and offers the most support for their family. We must also consider in more detail the impact that the introduction of tax-free childcare will have across all different family types.

One of the key problems is that this is an extremely complex area, and the interaction of two schemes with the benefits system is an additional layer of complicated bureaucracy for parents. For example, the Low Incomes Tax Reform Group highlighted in February that universal credit and tax credit claimants must seek advice before applying for tax-free childcare.
“If an existing tax credit claimant makes a claim for TFC, even if they do not claim any help with childcare costs through tax credits, their whole tax credit claim will be automatically terminated. If they live in an area where universal credit full service has rolled out they may find that they are not able to claim tax credits again and this is very confusing.”

That is a significant issue with the new scheme, so how are the Government making people aware of it? We know that the DWP is notoriously bad at awareness campaigns, as we have seen with the WASPI women—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—or the massively under-marketed Access to Work programme. We also know that the UK Government’s benefit changes are already creating confusion for people. Figures from the Government Digital Service have revealed that claimants appear to be encountering significant problems with the Government’s Verify system for universal credit, with 48 out of 91 needing help at a jobcentre to set up an account.

In Scotland, the SNP Government have committed to almost doubling the funded early learning and childcare entitlement by 2020, from 600 to 1,140 hours, in a bid to transform the life chances of children in Scotland. Our universal childcare offer is unmatched in the rest of the UK. In Scotland, all three and four-year-olds, and eligible two-year-olds, will benefit from 1,140 hours. The full entitlement is estimated to save families over £350 per child per month, or £4,500 a year.

Before I conclude, I would like to touch briefly on the other two motions, which relate to devolved matters. On the free school lunches and milk motion, every child at a local council school in Scotland can get free school lunches in primary 1, 2 and 3, regardless of financial circumstances. Some children in funded childcare before starting school can also get free meals. That is a year more than is currently provided in England. The UK Government’s universal credit system requires arbitrary thresholds, which create a cliff edge for parents, as has been discussed. We continue to call on the UK Government to devolve powers and funding so that we can take control of universal credit in its entirety in Scotland and deliver it in the best way possible for the people of Scotland.

Finally, on the free childcare motion, we have committed to fully funding our transformative expansion of early learning and childcare entitlement to 1,140 hours by 2020, and we have a track record of delivering on the previous expansion from 475 hours to 600 hours.

In conclusion, in all these areas what is clear is that when issues are devolved we see better policy and better outcomes for the people of Scotland.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There is now a five-minute limit on speeches.

3.53 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I welcome the universal credit regulations that the House is considering. We should not forget that universal credit is an important reform that is getting more people back into work and helping them to stay in work. People are getting help and support from DWP staff that they did not get in the past.

I think that a mark of the policy is the enthusiasm shown by jobcentre staff. I had the privilege of visiting my local jobcentre in 2014—I have visited it since, of course—alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). That day they were holding a regional training conference for up-and-coming leaders, and when we walked into their training room, which was full of civil servants, they all immediately started applauding my right hon. Friend. That showed me that they do not owe any Government anything, in terms of support or loyalty. It showed me that they think the reforms that he was introducing, and that the Government are now rolling out, are worth doing. Having visited the people who work in jobcentres, and having spoken to them since, it is clear to me that they think that the reforms are now making a real and positive difference.

I will not say that the roll-out of universal credit has been without challenges. We all know it has, which is why the Government are putting forward this package today worth £1.5 billion. We should also acknowledge that if the package is voted down, people who need help might not be able to receive their advance within five weeks or get the extra six months to repay any advance, and they might have to go back to seven weeks of waiting time while their claim is processed. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State also raised the possibility of people being in a worse position with regard to housing benefit. The House therefore needs to think very carefully before voting down these regulations, which are positive and are what Opposition Members wanted just a few months ago.

On free school meals, it is important to point out that the regulations we are debating today do not change the entitlement for year 1 and 2 children, all of whom receive free school meals. We also need to be careful with the figure of 1 million children losing out. As soon as I heard that figure—on that same afternoon—I accosted the Education Minister during a vote to ask him whether it was true. He said clearly that it was not true, so we need to look at the facts.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My hon. Friend will recognise that the Opposition’s proposal on free school meals in their manifesto was to pay for them by charging VAT on private schools, which is illegal under EU law. Does my hon. Friend find it confusing that they would prefer to stay in the single market and the customs union, when that would be at odds with that policy?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend demonstrates the complete confusion and disarray of the Opposition, not just on this policy but on our future outside the European Union. That goes to the heart of the situation: this is all about political dogma, rather than practical ideas and practical help for people.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman think that the Children’s Society’s figure of 16,500 children being denied free school meals in the county of Cheshire, which the Secretary of State and I represent, is political dogma?

Mr Jones: The new system is more generous than the old system. I will come on to the external evidence that explains that in a moment.

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Returning to what I was saying about free school meals, under the old system of jobseeker’s allowance as soon as a parent worked 16 hours, or two parents worked 24 hours, they lost their children’s entitlement to free school meals. The crux of this debate is comparing and contrasting that with what we are moving to. All those currently in the system have been eligible, because of transitional arrangements. Conservative Members have made it clear why the transitional arrangements were put in place. Under the new system, when everybody is on universal credit and these regulations are in place, by 2022 an additional 50,000 children will be eligible for free school meals. I hear all the noise from Opposition Members, but they should not just take my word for it or that of other Conservative Members. They should go on to the “Channel 4 News” FactCheck website, which says:

“This is not a case of the government taking free school meals from a million children who are currently receiving them. It’s about comparing two future, hypothetical scenarios.”

Both of them are more generous than the old benefits system.

The Labour party frequently looks for us to improve the situation and the lives of the most vulnerable. That is what this policy and these regulations are doing today, but unfortunately, Labour seems not to let the truth and the facts get in the way of a good story. There is too much political dogma and it is putting that before people. The Government are putting people first. This system will be better than the system was hitherto and that is why I will support the Government tonight.

4.1 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): The measures that we are debating expose what has been happening to our country since 2010. In the name of deficit reduction and fiscal responsibility, the Tories have allowed the poorest and most vulnerable to become poorer and even more vulnerable. A Prime Minister who once courageously warned her own party that it was perceived by too many as the nasty party is presiding over a Government who have a cavalier disregard for social justice and the poverty that shame our country.

It is true that in the aftermath of a global financial crisis, any UK Government would have had to make tough choices, striking the right balance between spending cuts, tax increases and investment in growth. However, the reality is that too often they have made the wrong choices—choices motivated by an ideological project to wither the state, irrespective of its impact to the will of the people. The Government are putting people first. This system will be better than the system was hitherto and that is why I will support the Government tonight.

Anna Soubry: The hon. Gentleman is rewriting history. The fact is that if the Labour Government had fixed the roof when the sun was shining, when that crisis came along they could have weathered the storm. That is what this responsible Government have been doing since 2010.

Mr Lewis: The right hon. Lady’s party wanted us to regulate the banks and the financial services sector less than under the regulatory system we had in place. It committed to matching our spending and borrowing and did not want us to rescue the banks. Imagine if that prescription had been followed at the time we were dealing with the financial crisis.

The Government’s choices are motivated by an ideological project to wither the state, irrespective of its impact. Their disproportionate cuts have choked off growth and destroyed too much of our social fabric. Their tax changes have failed dismally to tackle tax avoidance or to ensure that, in tough times, those with the most carry the greatest burden. Their failure to invest in infrastructure, skills and jobs has led to economic growth that is anaemic compared with similar economies. The Government’s own assessments predict that this economic failure will be made even worse by the uncertainty and instability that are the inevitable consequences of Brexit.

Perhaps the right hon. Lady will agree with me on this point: history will record that the referendum was nothing to do with the national interest or giving voice to the will of the people. It was David Cameron’s fix for managing the Tory party through a general election.

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Lewis: I am not giving way again to the right hon. Lady. Far from being the party of economic competence, hers is the party of economic chaos.

To be clear, the policies we are opposing today are neither necessary nor acceptable in a civilised society; they are political choices made by this Tory Government. As we have heard in this debate, Tory Members are in denial. Too many of our fellow citizens might as well be living in a different country from the one they describe. The reality for those people is food banks, perpetual debt, a poor quality of life and a lack of hope for themselves and their children. Some, of course, are dependent on benefits, but increasing numbers are people in work on permanent low pay and insecure contracts. This should offend any Member who believes not only in social justice but in the future of mainstream politics. Here and abroad, people who feel left behind by mainstream politics are increasingly turning to anti-establishment nationalism, which spreads hate and division. That is another reason these policies are so irresponsible.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): A few moments ago, the hon. Gentleman denounced Brexit, yet his own area of Bury voted to leave the EU. How would that have helped with the politics of disenfranchising people and making them turn towards extremes?

Mr Lewis: The hon. Gentleman entirely misses the point. Of course I believe that the result of the referendum must be respected; I question the motive for the referendum
in the first place. It was David Cameron’s folly—that is how history will remember him—and was done in the interests of the Conservative party, not those of our country.

Anna Soubry: I too have respect—some—for the hon. Gentleman, although it is beginning to wane. I do not want to fall out with him, but I would make one point to him. It is not good enough just to blame it all on David Cameron. The hon. Gentleman, like me and the majority of people in the House, walked through the Lobbies in support of a referendum, and we are now dealing with the consequences. We were all complicit in agreeing that the British people should vote and determine whether we stayed or left.

Mr Lewis: I simply say—I think that history will bear this out—that it was done purely to keep the Conservative party together and to get through a general election. It had nothing to do with the national interest and everything to do with the arrogance of the then Prime Minister and Chancellor in believing that they would almost inevitably win such a referendum.

I will turn now to the measures on universal credit and free school meals. The Government could hardly have made more of a mess of universal credit. The National Audit Office stated that the project had suffered from “weak management, ineffective control and poor governance”. Is that the responsibility of the current Secretary of State or her predecessor? Perhaps she would like to respond—no? Okay. Cuts to universal credit passed in the last two years have left a majority of families worse off on universal credit than under the system it replaces, and this further reduction in support will add to their financial pain. The proposed threshold could have a negative effect on work incentives and risks creating poverty traps for families on universal credit, which goes completely against the Government’s goal that universal credit should always reward work.

In the 1980s, Tory policies created a deeply divided society. They have learnt nothing from history and are once again fuelling a cycle of intergenerational deprivation that hurts those most affected but which in the end damages us all. I hope the House will today force the Government to rethink these regressive measures.

4.8 pm

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I do not approach the matters in the statutory instruments lightly, and I will tell hon. Members why. I was brought up by a single parent who was widowed a month before I was born, who worked shifts in a factory and who got by on a widow’s pension, child benefit and the money she made and by managing that money carefully, so I know only too well the impact that such changes can have. But I also know that people in those situations are acutely concerned about changes coming down the line and the alarmist things being said currently. I appeal to the Opposition, particularly the Front-Bench team, to think of those people when they make alarmist statements. By all means have legitimate, fair and open debate, but do not trot out numbers that are simply not true; do not let people believe that something as precious as free school meals is being taken away from them when that is not the case. I ask those on our Front Bench whether these changes remotely resemble what has been proposed by Labour Front Benchers. They are not changes that I could support, but they are nothing like what Labour is proposing.

I thank the Secretary of State for Education for his letter outlining the Government’s position on free school meals. In it, he states: “The proposed changes to the eligibility criteria have been designed to ensure that support is targeted where it is needed most, meaning that those on the lowest incomes remain the focus of Free School Meals...” No child will lose their meals during the rollout of Universal credit as a result of these changes. Our plans mean an extra 50,000 children will be eligible for a nutritious meal at school by 2022.

Labour’s claim that out changes could leave over a quarter of a million children without this is deliberately misleading.”

As I have said, there are people out there in the real world who think that something will be taken from them and their children, which causes them concern and alarm. I question whether there is a deliberate attempt to weaponise the vulnerable, just as people once boasted about the NHS being weaponised in order to rig votes. I urge Members not to do that, because they will cause fear and anxiety where it is not required. There is enough fear and anxiety in those households as it is.

The letter continues: “Since 2010, we have extended the availability for free school meals to disadvantaged students in further education and introduced universal infant free school meals. When Universal Credit was introduced, the Government were clear that they would set a new criteria for free school meals. To ensure that no one was adversely affected during its roll out, the Government temporarily made Universal Credit a qualifying benefit for Free School Meals, regardless of income. As was made clear at the time, this was always an interim measure... If you receive a free school meal now—you will continue to do so until the end of the rollout of Universal Credit, planned for 2022, and then to the end of either primary or secondary school (which ever you are in at this point).

For example a child in year 5 on a FSM now, whose parents are on UC but have an income of £40,000, will continue to get a FSM until the end of secondary school.”

I know that many colleagues want to take part in the debate, but I particularly want to thank the Government Front Bench for a robust defence of an important policy. Let us nail the myths, the untruths and the attempts to frighten people. If the Labour party continues to peddle things that are untrue, it behoves us to state what is true and not to frighten the vulnerable, many of whom we are all proud to represent.

4.13 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I have been raising these issues in the Chamber for a number of years. Why is that? First, those we are talking about today, whether they are above or below the arbitrary thresholds that the Government are setting, are by their nature very low-income families who are struggling every day to get by. Secondly, the whole point of universal credit was to remove cliff edges from the system, so that once people reached a certain point they would not suddenly lose a number of benefits that make quite a significant difference to a “just about managing” family. Those arbitrary thresholds are taking away the very principles of that position.

I recently spoke to a number of parents in Moss Side, in my constituency, about their predicament. Those who had lost free school meals described acutely what it
meant to them. Some had two, three or four children, which meant that they were losing £10 or £11 a week per child. Moreover, they were losing bus passes, the entitlement to free school uniforms and the entitlement to free school trips. What were they doing? They were not going to pay that £10 or £11 to the school for free school meals, so most of them were sending their children to school with white-bread jam sandwiches to last them for the entire day. That is not something I want to see happening in my constituency.

The need of these families has not changed; they are still on the breadline—they might be just above it, but they are still absolutely operating on the breadline. The impact of losing the two-year-old offer for these families could mean that about £54 a week is suddenly gone because of this cliff-edge. For those with children aged two this is particularly pernicious, because we are probably talking about young mums who are re-entering the labour market for the first time, and we are disincentivising them from working. The real problem with the Government's policy is that it breaks the principle of universal credit: it is putting into the system disincentives to work more or take on higher paid work for, by their definition, low income, just-about-managing families.

My wider point is about the impact of these policies on social mobility and supporting these families to get on in life. The mothers I spoke to in Moss Side also had the school headteacher there, and she told me about the impact of the loss of free school meals on her school budget. This is a single-form entry primary school in Moss Side where the needs of the community are the same today as they have ever been. About 25 out of 30 children in year 6 are on free school meals, and coming in from nursery are about four or five; that is because of changes already coming in. We must remember that this has a huge impact on school budgets as well, because of the loss of the pupil premium.

I want to talk particularly about the developmental gap at the age of five and the impact of this particularly stringent new threshold on receiving the two-year-old offer. I fully supported the Government in bringing in the two-year-old offer for disadvantaged families, and we know from the evaluation that where that is given in a quality setting it can transform the life chances of those children, so surely we should be debating how we can extend that provision for more disadvantaged families, not reducing it.

Analysis I produced last year showed that many of the tax-free childcare offers and the three and four-year-old offer coming in disproportionately benefit better-off families: 75% of that extra money going into tax-free offers, and the three and four-year-old offer will go to the top 50% of earners in this country. Lower-income families and those on universal credit will reap very little benefit from these other offers. We are therefore going to see lack of social mobility getting entrenched, not being addressed.

I will leave everybody with the words of the Prime Minister, who said that to “build a great meritocracy in Britain, we need to broaden our perspective and do more for the hidden disadvantaged”.

These new measures will narrow the current provisions, not broaden them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The time limit is now four minutes.

4.18 pm

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): We are debating a number of important statutory instruments, and in the light of the time constraints, I will confine my comments to the measures relating to free school meals.

The benefits of free school meals for those who need them have been set out today and in the past. While it is absolutely right that we debate these new eligibility criteria for free school meals, although it is disappointing that there are no Liberal Democrats in the Chamber, it is also right that we do so with a focus on facts, not inaccurate claims—the Secretary of State made the position clear—that these proposals take away free school meals from children. In fact, as has been set out, it is estimated that by 2022, under the new regulations, about 50,000 more children—more, not fewer—will benefit from a free school meal than under the previous benefit system.

The approach in these regulations not only extends support to more children, but ensures, as my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) made clear, that we target that support at those who most need it and where it will have the greatest impact in changing lives. As he also set out, the Government have always been open and clear that when universal credit was rolled out, there would be new criteria, but that no child currently on free school meals would lose out until 2022, and that those in either primary or secondary school would continue to benefit while in that school.

Much is being made of claims that 1 million children will have free school meals taken from them, but that is simply not accurate. I am not usually one to cite “Channel 4 News”, but on this occasion, like my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), I will quote its FactCheck verdict, which reads:

“This is not a case of the government taking free school meals from a million children who are currently receiving them. It's about comparing two future, hypothetical scenarios, one of which is more generous than the other.”

Both of them are more generous than the old benefits system.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Edward Argar: I will not, because I am conscious of the time.

An issue such as this, which is of real importance to many people, quite rightly excites strong passions and strong arguments, but it is important that we stick to the facts. An Opposition who are unable to muster coherent arguments against actual Government policy are instead taking issue with hypothetical Government policy and scenarios. I am committed to ensuring that disadvantaged young people can get a free nutritious meal at school, and I am sure that that is true of all colleagues on both sides of the House, regardless of where they stand on these two hypothetical scenarios. These measures mean that more people will be able to
get free school meals than at present, which is why I will be voting with the Government to extend the eligibility for free school meals.

4.21 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): These regulations will affect millions of families up and down the country, so it is only right that we are able to discuss them today. The Government consulted from November to January on introducing an earnings threshold that would restrict free school meals to families with net earnings under £7,400 per annum. The consultation received 8,981 responses. However, the Government excluded 8,421 of those responses from their analysis, meaning that fewer than 4% of respondents agreed with the Government. Surely that goes against every rule of public consultations. Talk about statistics being used against vulnerable people!

In 2010, the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions promised in the White Paper on universal credit that it would “ensure that work always pays and is seen to pay. Universal Credit will mean that people will be consistently and transparently better off for each hour they work and every pound they earn.”

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am glad that my hon. Friend has picked out that point. She will have heard the Secretary of State saying that jobcentres would advise people not to take extra work or to get a pay rise because they would end up worse off. Is that not absolutely contrary to the whole principle of universal credit that she has just read out?

Mrs Hodgson: Yes, absolutely. We know that the Government are today reneging on the former Secretary of State’s commitment.

Free school meals are worth far more to a family than £400 a year per child. That might not seem to be a lot to some hon. Members, but to those families it is an absolute lifeline. By introducing a £7,400 threshold for eligibility, the Government are forcibly creating a cliff edge that will be detrimental to families, especially children. To give just one example, someone with three children in their family who earns just below the £7,400 threshold is set to lose out on £1,200-worth of free school meals if they work only a few extra hours or get a pay rise. The Opposition’s proposal would simply remove the huge cliff edge and the work disincentive for families who most need support. It would take away the barrier to working extra hours or seeking promotion. Our proposals would therefore make work pay. The Government’s proposal is in fact the new 16 hours, which they said was a disincentive.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that in Hartlepool, where universal credit is not being rolled out—it is already in—more than 1,000 children are being denied free school meals on the basis of the new proposal?

Mrs Hodgson: Yes. We can all cite the numbers from our constituencies. Even Conservative Members need to think about what they are doing to some of the poorest children in their constituencies. In the example I just quoted, the family’s annual wages would need to increase from £7,400 to almost £11,000 to make up for what they would lose by rising above the eligibility cliff edge. That problem did not occur under the old tax credit system, because that provided an offsetting income boost at the point at which free school meals were withdrawn. However, there is no equivalent mitigation under universal credit.

The Children’s Society has been much maligned today and has been cited as giving duff statistics—Conservative Members should be ashamed of themselves. It estimates that the cliff edge will mean that a million children in poverty will miss out on free school meals once universal credit is fully rolled out. They will miss out on something that is crucial for their physical and mental development.

The Government have said that 50,000 more children will benefit by the end of the roll-out in 2022, when the transitional protections are at capacity, but I and many others struggle to understand how that can be the case. Parliamentary questions tabled by my hon. Friends and others have gone unanswered, and the Government cannot just pluck figures out of the air, as they claim so many others have done. At least we can back up our claims with evidence from the Children’s Society, Gingerbread, the Child Poverty Action Group and Citizens Advice, all of which agree that this statutory instrument would take free school meals away from a million future children—[Interruption.] It would. If the SI does not come into force, a million more children will receive free school meals—[Interruption.] Conservative Members can shake their heads all they like.

During my recent Westminster Hall debate, I offered Ministers a solution that would mean that all children in universal credit households would continue to receive free school meals. As somebody asked earlier, I can say that it would cost half a billion pounds—not a huge cost to feed over a million of the poorest children. My proposal would see around 1.1 million children in years 3 and above from low-income families receiving free school meals compared with under this change.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): If we were to maintain free school meals for absolutely everybody on universal credit, does the hon. Lady think it would be right to prioritise those coming from the legacy tax credit system, who could be earning up to £50,000 a year, instead of opening up eligibility and getting free school meals to more children in poverty?

Mrs Hodgson: I am running out of time, so—[Interruption.] Perhaps Conservative Members would let me finish before they use up all my time. I was going to say that while I cannot go into the full details, because of the time, I understand from the Children’s Society that a small number of people are getting up to £40,000. Those people are in large families with severely disabled children. The large amount of money is down to how much they receive for those children. It is disingenuous to use that as an example and to make out that all those families are receiving that amount.

The Minister claimed yesterday that my proposal would result in around half of all pupils becoming eligible, increasing the figure to 3.3 million children. Even the much-cited Channel 4 FactCheck article states that our proposal would extend to 1.1 million children, making the total 1.8 million children. When we talk about facts, Conservative Members need to get their facts right. Where do the extra 1.5 million children come from?
4.28 pm

**Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Opposition Members know that I have been the first to stand up and challenge the Government on universal credit, and the Government have listened. First, at the 2016 autumn statement, we reduced the taper rate from 65% to 63%, which cost the country £700 million but put around £300 into families’ pockets. Secondly, I worked with the Government at the end of last year to secure £1.5 billion of comprehensive improvements: two weeks’ extra housing benefit for those transitioning on to universal credit with housing payments; double the advance payment and twice as long to pay it back: direct payments to landlords; and a slowed-down roll-out. Those were all things that the Opposition asked for, so I am staggered that they are asking us to vote against them today.

For the past two years, I have worked not only with my colleagues, but proudly on a cross-party basis to achieve those improvements. Today is a big wake-up call. These motions are not about improving universal credit, but simply about playing politics. I have seen that for the first time. The Government have taken the time to understand how best to transfer a lump-sum benefit such as free school meals into a tapered system such as universal credit. An earnings threshold is perfectly acceptable to all reasonable people—by the way, we are talking about taxpayers. The only possible improvement I could encourage Ministers to look at is automatic entitlement if there is a disability in the family.

Let us get the facts straight. All reception, year 1 and year 2 children will continue to receive free school meals—full stop. The measures apply only to year 3 and beyond. All those currently receiving free school meals will continue to receive them until the end of their phase of schooling or 2022, whichever is the further away. Labour is creating false headlines by saying that any child will lose. Under the proposals, the Government will focus better on children who are in, or at risk of, poverty. That is, as we have heard, around 50,000 children by 2022.

**Ben Bradley:** Conservative Members know that no children will lose their existing entitlement to free school meals or free childcare as a result of our policies. Meanwhile, my jobcentre says that fear of universal credit is the biggest challenge that it faces in the roll-out. Will my hon. Friend comment on where that fear might be coming from?

**Heidi Allen:** My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. That fear is particularly prevalent on social media. There is a saying that a mistruth can travel halfway around the world before the truth has even put its boots on. That is happening with universal credit, aided and abetted by social media. Universal credit is not even in my constituency yet, but I hear from constituents who are worried about it. Oddly enough, I can put their minds completely at rest when I explain it to them.

As I have mentioned, tax credits recipients automatically get free school meals at the moment, which could mean that a family on £50,000 a year receives them. That cannot be right—[Interjection] People on legacy tax credits who do not have disabilities in their family—those on the old benefit system who are transferring over—can have regular incomes of up to that level. The new system expands the criteria so that we can get to more children who need our support, not fewer.

Although I understand that a key part of any charity’s role is lobbying, I am disappointed in the Children’s Society. Its suggestion that 1 million children will lose free school meals is simply not true. Labour has jumped on that bandwagon, and it has taught me a lesson. There are colleagues from all parts of this House—SNP Members included—whom I trust and respect, and with whom I will continue to work to improve the lives of the most vulnerable in society, but if people think that the Labour party is the answer to tackling poverty, they are being misled. Today—this is a big wake-up call to me—the Labour party has clearly shown that it is prioritising headlines over improving the lives of struggling families. If you want a headline spun, Mr Deputy Speaker, ask the Labour party; if you want a competent job done, ask the Tory party.

4.32 pm

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): I want to focus on a single point. The proposals for eligibility for free school meals are catastrophic for work incentives in the welfare system. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith)—I am sad to see that he is not in his place—used to tell us that the central point of welfare reform was to improve work incentives, but these proposals rob universal credit of its most attractive feature.

The Secretary of State for Education used to be in charge of universal credit, but this is not so much a criticism of him as a criticism of his predecessors. Ministers in the Department for Education have had seven years to solve the problem—admittedly, it is difficult and technical—of how to define eligibility for free school meals against the backdrop of universal credit. Instead of solving the problem, they have simply adopted a very lazy solution. In doing so, they are creating a very big problem for work incentives in the welfare system. One day, future Ministers will have to resolve that problem. It is disappointing that under the leadership of the Secretary of State, who understands universal credit as well as anybody, they have gone down this very lazy line.

My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) has just quoted from the universal credit White Paper, which sets out the philosophy that underpins the new benefit. I will quote another bit from chapter 2, which makes clear the principle that

> “increased effort will always result in increased reward.”

That is what UC is supposed to be about, but under these proposals that will not the case. As we have heard, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions told us that, when someone is just below the threshold, the jobcentre will advise them not to put in any more effort, not to get a pay rise and not to put in more hours. The jobcentre will recognise that, if they were to do that, they would end up worse off.

**Mrs Hodgson:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that this just reintroduces in a different guise the much maligned 16-hour threshold, which the Government said this was all to do away with?

**Stephen Timms:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. The whole idea about UC was that it was supposed to get rid of cliff edges and benefit traps, but
instead it is introducing a benefit trap far bigger and far worse than anything in the old benefit system. This is completely scuppering the whole purpose of UC. If it is true, as the Secretary of State told us, that jobcentre coaches are going to say to people, “No, don’t take on extra work. Don’t get a pay rise. Don’t go for more hours because if you do, you will end up worse off,” how are people supposed to progress? Surely all of us would recognise that the point about this system is to encourage progression, not to have bureaucrats telling people, “Oh no, don’t progress because if you do, you’ll end up worse off.” This is a catastrophic holing of the whole purpose of UC, and it is not as though only a few people will be affected.

The prospect was that UC would solve all these cliff edges and benefit traps, but instead it is creating one that is much bigger. It has been calculated—I am indebted to the Children’s Society for this calculation—that more than 1 million people will be caught in the trap if these proposals go ahead. I will explain to the Education Secretary exactly why that is; he can read this in briefing the Children’s Society has provided. Some 280,000 families are affected, containing between them more than 700,000 children. Among those are 125,000 families earning below the threshold who risk being worse off if they take on extra work or get a pay rise, as the Work and Pensions Secretary recognised. In addition, there are 150,000 families earning above the threshold who would be better off if they reduced their earnings to below the threshold, so that they would then qualify for free school meals. What sort of system is that? Everybody will recognise that we do not want a welfare system that puts people in that position, but that is the system we will end up with if this statutory instrument goes through. The Children’s Society calculates that almost 21,000 families—containing more than 80,000 children aged eight to 15—who earn more than £7,400 would be better off if they cut their earnings to below the threshold to qualify for school meals. This is a catastrophic arrangement.

4.37 pm

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate, particularly after my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), whose speech was really powerful. It showed how badly Opposition Front Benchers have misjudged this debate. For weeks, outside this House, they have sought to pretend that we are taking free school meals off 1 million children, but that has come to this House and has bombed, because it is not true. The reality is that not a single child currently eligible for free school meals will lose them and that, under UC, 50,000 more children will be eligible for free school meals. This shows the limits of an approach that is all about the viral video and getting something that goes around on social media quickly; it goes too quickly for the fact-checkers to catch up with, but when it comes to this House and we learn the facts, it absolutely bombs.

If people are serious about being in government, they have to make choices, and this Government have made choices. The Opposition say they would like simply to give free school meals out universally, as part of a wider strategy in which we can just spend more money on everything and no one will have to pay any more tax—of course, it is all nonsense. It is the kind of dangerous nonsense that led to the Government borrowing a quarter of all the money they were spending in 2010, a disastrous situation in which we also had half a million men and women thrown on the dole in the worst economic meltdown for a generation.

If we choose priorities that enable us to do important things for working families with children, that allows us to extend eligibility for the new tax-free childcare from 600,000 people to 1.5 million people, to have important things such as the 30 hours’ free childcare offer, to have the important two-year-old childcare offer, which under UC is being expanded by another 7,000, and to have the more generous childcare element of UC, which is going up from 75% to 85%.

Prioritisation also helps with important interventions such as the pupil premium, with another £2.5 billion for the most disadvantaged children, and the new fair funding formula for schools, which is backed up by another £1.3 billion. The year 7s I met the other day at Beauchamp College in my constituency, of whom 60% will be eligible for the pupil premium, will get to go to Cambridge, do a science project and see their lives and opportunities absolutely transformed, because we are prepared to take the difficult decisions, to invest in those children’s futures and to give them a better chance in life.

It is incredibly important that we do not simply drift back to the mistakes of the past. Compared with what it was like when I was at school, the help for children who are less advantaged is so much better now. We have done brilliant things such as destigmatising free school meals: pupils no longer go in with their money, so it cannot be seen who is on free school meals and who is not. When I think back to what it was like when I was at school, I can see the big improvement we have made since my generation.

We have seen big improvements for working families with children because even as we have brought down the worst Government Budget deficit in this country’s entire peace time history, we have prioritised, and we have done so in ways that help the most vulnerable and that help to improve life chances for those who do not have them.

4.41 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, in which I wish to focus my remarks on childcare and free school meals.

I put on record that the Liberal Democrats are proud of the role that we played in the coalition Government to secure a generous tax-free offer on childcare that helps many families. Although it is true that it will extend to more families, it is also true that many others will be left out. That was never the intention. Many parents—particularly those with older children, lower childcare costs or lower incomes—will find themselves worse off under tax-free childcare than they would have been with childcare vouchers. It is unfair to close the scheme to new entrants, particularly because, unsurprisingly, the information about the closure of the scheme has not been spread as far and wide as it could have been. I urge all those parents who are listening to the debate—I am sure that there are many—to do their research before April, so that they can decide what is best for their families. All we are suggesting is that tax-free childcare and childcare vouchers are kept open concurrently, so that we can provide maximum flexibility for families. Surely, the Government would agree that that would be a good thing.
I hope that the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the former Liberal Democrat Ministers David Laws and Sarah Teather for battling to secure universal free school meals for all children in key stage 1. Soon after I was elected, I visited West Oxford Community Primary School and had the pleasure of meeting the catering manager. She told me that, despite being sceptical of the policy initially, she now thinks it is brilliant. She took great pride in telling me of a boy from a deprived background who did not eat much veg at home because it is quite expensive. Slowly—slowly—she got him to love broccoli.

I am a primary school governor, and the teachers at the school are absolutely clear—that universal free school meals are beneficial for learning and attainment and help all children. The Government like to nick Liberal Democrat policies—including same-sex marriage, the pupil premium and lifting the income tax threshold, as we heard in the spring statement earlier—and I am not precious, so they can have another one: extend free school meals to all children in primary schools. If not that, they could at least extend them to all children on universal credit.

Unlike under tax credits, universal credit creates an absurd situation wherein a single-parent household on the national living wage will have to work eight more hours to make it work. Surely, that is not what the Government intended. Linked to that, of course, is the fact that the number of children on free school meals will affect the pupil premium. I posit that that is the reason why the Government will not roll out free school meals to all children on universal credit—because, yes, it would be prohibitively expensive and would stop the targeting of the pupil premium.

May I suggest to the Secretary of State that, to sort that out, just decouple them? They are, in their own right, worthy policies. They are policies that are working and there is no reason to throw the baby out with the bathwater. May I urge the Government to think again on free school meals and to think again on closing the childcare voucher scheme?

4.45 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is good to follow the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). She talked about the years when our two parties were in coalition, and we all recognise and welcome the fact that we have those universal free school meals for infant children; it was a positive step forward.

I was not intending to speak in this debate this afternoon—and I am someone who is always happy to debate with anyone—but I was moved to speak not just because I have received quite a bit of correspondence from concerned constituents on this matter, but because I genuinely believe that it is incumbent on all Members of this House to argue and to make their points. In doing so, though, we must make sure that what we say is grounded in fact, and that we do not play fast and loose with the arguments, because what we say here has very real consequences for people in our constituencies.

Some very worried parents have been in contact with me today. This situation is rather like the time when the shadow Front Bench claimed that 40,000 children would wake up in poverty on Christmas day because the Tories refused to pause and fix universal credit, and the chairman of the UK Statistics Authority said that that was not fully supported by the statistics and the sources on which it had relied. I am afraid that it appears to me that the Opposition are at it again. Therefore, I want to use my remarks this afternoon to speak directly to those concerned parents in Corby and east Northamptonshire who have been in touch with me about this issue.

First, we would all agree that free school meals, and the provision of those free school meals, should be targeted at the most disadvantaged children; I would like to think that there was universal agreement on that point. To say that meals are being taken away from those disadvantaged children is simply plain wrong. It is not just me who is saying it—[Interruption.] Opposition Members can chunter all they like, but that is the case. The independent “Channel 4 News” FactCheck website exposed all of this for exactly what it is and I recommend that everybody takes a look at it. “Channel 4 News” would not necessarily be considered to be a friend of the Conservative party, but it made this point none the less. No child will lose their free school meals during the roll-out of universal credit as a result of these changes. In actual fact, an extra 50,000 children will probably have access to free school meals by 2022. I would welcome that, and I would expect the Opposition to welcome that, too. I cannot possibly see what there is to argue against in that position. Again, I make the point that, since 2010, we have extended the availability of access to free school meals to disadvantaged students in further education and introduced universal infant free school meals.

We should not look at this issue in isolation; other things are going on as well that are very important to those families. Not only do we have record numbers of people in employment, but we have also taken 4 million of the lowest paid out of income tax altogether. We have cut income tax for 31 million people in this country, and we have focused on the principle that being in work should always pay. Any fair-minded person in this country would agree that that is the right approach, but that, of course, there should always be a safety net for those who find themselves in need. That is exactly what this policy, in a holistic sense, allows.

I am proud of our record. I have to say that I am slightly perplexed by where we find ourselves today, because rather like on police funding, on local government funding, and on protecting our industries from dumping on our market, the Labour party tonight will vote against extending free school meals for another 50,000 children, and I find that extraordinary.

4.49 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove). The Government know that stopping free school meals for the poorest children is a shameful policy. They sought to bring the measures in using statutory instruments, in the hope that any challenge would be ineffective. It is clear that the Government do not want to explain this indefensible change.

Some 3,700 children in Bedford are set to miss out on vital support if free school meals are withdrawn from families on universal credit. The Government need to understand that the poverty trap is very easy to get into, but very difficult to get out of. Every penny counts for
those families, and for many working families there simply are not enough pennies to get through the month. Last summer, 47% of children who received support from food banks were between five and 11 years old.

Heidi Allen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mohammad Yasin: I am sorry, but I cannot. Many other Members want to speak and it is fair to give them a chance.

During the summer holidays 4,412 more three-day emergency food supplies were given to children than in previous months, and we know that children on free school meals already underperform in schools. Why would any Government choose to make life more difficult and more challenging for those children?

Mark Menzies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mohammad Yasin: A number of Members want to speak. It would be unfair if I gave way, as the hon. Gentleman has spoken already.

Why would a Government who claim to want to tackle inequality, to help the disadvantaged, to tackle child obesity and to help out those who are just about managing come up with a policy that does the exact opposite? The new earnings limit is a huge step backwards. According to the Children’s Society, 1 million children in poverty who could benefit now will not. This policy also undermines one of the main reasons given for introducing universal credit in the first place—to ensure that “work always pays”. The new rules will create a situation where working families will be punished for taking on extra hours or accepting a pay rise because they would have their free school meals taken away. These are worth around £400 a year per child—a huge sum for those on a low income.

A recent report from the Food Foundation highlights the deprivation gap, which has increased by more than 50% in a decade. Children in the poorest areas of England are twice as likely to be obese as their wealthier neighbours. The Government could have tackled that problem by increasing the uptake of free school meals and ensuring that all children from low-income households receive a nutritious meal at lunchtime. Instead they are taking those meals away. The Government should have learned from their attempts to take away free school meals in the manifesto that they put to the country last year that they have no mandate to reduce school meals in the manifesto that they put to the country last year. It is wholly inaccurate to suggest that there was ever a hypothetical Government policy under which these children would ever have received extra school meals.

The shadow Education Secretary has done this House and herself a great disservice—In; She clearly is—she ought to explain how much it would have cost her to do so, because her words matter and she should weigh them carefully.

Angela Rayner: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is there any recourse for me to challenge the fact that an hon. Member is suggesting that I have misled this House in this debate?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): First of all, nobody will mislead this House because we are all hon. Members. I am sure that when we come to the wind-ups, nobody will mislead this House because we are all hon. Members. I am sure that when we come to the wind-ups, everything will be put in its correct order.

Chris Philp: The hon. Lady and her party have suggested that everybody in receipt of universal credit should receive free school meals. That has never been the policy of the Government, but apparently it is the policy of the Labour party. That would entail about 50% of schoolchildren receiving free school meals. She was asked, in a direct question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), how much this policy, which goes beyond that in the Labour manifesto, would cost and how she would pay for it, but she declined to answer. If she is advocating this policy which goes far beyond current Government policy—as she clearly is—she ought to explain how much it would cost and how she would pay for it, because promising things for free without explaining how they would be paid for is a deeply irresponsible thing to do. I will support the Government in this evening’s Divisions.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): It is time to be frank. Universal credit is currently a failure. It is not working how it was meant to. It is not supporting the people who need it. Its roll-out happened too fast,
which meant that there has not been time to fix the many issues that have been brought to the House’s attention.

Twenty-four per cent. of children in my constituency live in poverty. In some areas, that figure increases to 40%. For some of the children whose parents are on universal credit, the hot, nutritionally balanced meal they have for lunch at school will be their main meal of the day. In no way is that a good situation to face, but at least those children are being fed. Well, not if Government Front Benchers have anything to do with it. Removing free school meals from those families who are claiming universal credit and who need them the most is deplorable. What kind of society do we want to live in? What Government in their right mind would take a hot meal off a child in need?

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con) rose—

Thelma Walker: I am going to make progress. Let me take hon. Members back to the 2016 Conservative party conference, where the Prime Minister said:

“I want to set our party and our country on the path towards the new centre ground of British politics built on the values of fairness and opportunity where everyone plays by the same rules and where every single person—regardless of their background, or that of their parents—is given the chance to be all they want to be. And as I do so, I want to be clear about something else: that a vision is nothing without the determination to see it through. No vision ever built a business by itself. No vision ever clothed a family or fed a hungry child. No vision ever changed a country on its own. You need to put the hours in and the effort too.”

Why are Government Front Benchers not following the Prime Minister’s vision? Is it another sign of how she is in position but not in power? If she still believes in her own words, she must stand up and stop this attack on the poorest in our society.

My local authority, Kirklees Council, has seen a 20% increase in pupils claiming free school meals over the last four years, which goes to show how hard the Government’s austerity programme is hitting families. There has been a huge spike in food bank use, which also shows that we are a country on the cliff edge. Food banks do an amazing job of supporting those in need, and I commend the work of local food banks such as the Welcome Centre, which serves my constituency.

What kind of country do we want to live in? Do we want to live in a country where a child clings to a teacher’s hand as the school holidays approach, not wanting to leave school because they know they will be hungry for the next six weeks? Do we want to live in a country that chooses to let disadvantaged children go hungry? Do we want to live in a country where a child comes to school with a lunchbox filled only with a slice of stale bread? I have witnessed those things, and I can say that it is certainly not the kind of country I want to live in. Some 6,400 children in Kirklees will lose their free school meals because of the Government’s actions. I will bring my remarks to a close with a thought from Buzz Aldrin: if we can conquer space, we can conquer childhood hunger.

5.1 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), but I have not heard any real vision at all from Labour Members. It is disgraceful that their only vision for working-class people in this country is to remain on benefits. Universal credit is getting people into work. Some 63% of people on universal credit get into work, compared with 59% who were on jobseeker’s allowance.

No one can tell me that I do not know what it is like to grow up in a working-class family. I grew up in a working-class area of south London, where there was no hope or aspiration for working-class kids like me. We were told that all we would achieve was a lifetime on benefits. Our working-class communities up and down this country can achieve a lot more, and universal credit will help them to do so.

The second reason I am particularly angry with Labour Members is that they are spreading fear. I think they underestimate the fear they are causing in this country. When I was growing up, my family were poor. My dad worked as a labourer, and he did not often know when his next job was coming. If his job finished early, he did not get paid. If the subcontractor did not get paid, he did not get paid. There is a sickening, gnawing feeling in your stomach when you are not sure where the next penny is coming from. To tell 1 million families in this country that they will lose free school meals when that is absolutely wrong is scandalous, and Labour Members should be ashamed.

Let me reiterate the facts. All children in reception, year 1 and year 2 will continue to get free school meals, thanks to this Government. No existing recipients of universal credit will lose free school meals, thanks to this Government. Some 50,000 extra children will get free school meals who currently do not, and that is down to this Government. The means testing will not affect those who are earning just over £7,000, but those who are earning around £19,000 to £24,000. I do not think that Labour Members understand the impact they have when they spread this fear—and it is not a genuine mistake; it is political point scoring and using working-class families in this country as a political football. They should be ashamed of themselves.

I will be supporting the Government. I will be supporting 50,000 vulnerable families getting free school meals. If Labour Members vote against those working-class families, they need to look at themselves in the mirror, because it is the same thing they did a few months ago when they voted against 60,000 young people in this country benefiting from the abolition of stamp duty for first-time buyers. Labour Members talk about supporting working-class families in this country, but it is the Conservative Government who are actually delivering for them.

5.4 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I will limit my remarks to the universal credit portion of this debate. In accepting the failures so far, the Government have made some changes, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) pointed out, the changes due to come into force in April do not go far enough. Ministers should pause the roll-out of universal credit and review all the processes.

I want to go through a couple of the issues, but I could speak for a lot longer on many of the issues affecting my constituents. My constituency was a pilot area from 2013, and went from live service to full service in June 2016. Local agencies, Highland Council...
and I have been voicing such concerns since the pilot, and the proposed measures do not scratch the surface of what is required. The Secretary of State said earlier that this benefit will be “at the cutting edge”. I say to those yet to experience full service that, yes, they will see more cutting, particularly when it comes to the housing arrears that are being built up.

Like other local authorities, Highland Council is paying the price, and this will have an impact on all our communities, not just on people who are on universal credit. The additional administration costs alone are running at hundreds of thousands of pounds, but rent arrears continue to soar and will have an impact on the delivery of much needed housing, for example.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very serious point about housing benefit. Does he welcome the change that allows the benefit to be paid directly to the landlord, as opposed to going to the claimant?

Drew Hendry: I welcome any change that allows such things to happen. I would point out that we made that request of the Government for many years, and the concession was finally made, as I have pointed out, but much more needs to be done.

Rent arrears continue to soar, as I have said. Rent arrears due to universal credit were already at £1.6 million in Highland in 2016, but they were at £2.2 million in March 2017, and just six months later they were at £2.7 million. The average rent arrears for someone not on universal credit is £250, but for those on universal credit it is £840. We know that 30% of private landlords have already evicted a tenant because of universal credit arrears. According to the DWP’s own figures, this means that over 70,000 tenants in private accommodation face the threat of eviction due to the shambles of universal credit.

The UK Government continue to ignore the plight of people with a terminal illness who are forced to meet work coaches. I give credit to my local jobcentre, which has tried to put in place local workarounds to overcome the faults in the process. The UK Government must listen to MND Scotland, MND UK and Macmillan CAB, and remove these conditions to allow the terminally ill and their families some dignity as they face the end of their life. I ask Ministers to meet me to discuss how that can be brought forward. MND UK has said it does not believe that people who have claimed using DS 1500 should have to meet and have a conversation with a work coach, as this is highly inappropriate. The Government have already been found to have acted unlawfully in relation to 1.6 million people, at an estimated cost to the taxpayer of £3.7 billion, and they should not risk the same kind of slap-down over their treatment of the terminally ill.

As the roll-out continues, many more right hon. and hon. Members will feel the sharp effects on people and their communities. Ministers should go further in acknowledging the systemic failures before it adds more costs to people’s lives and drains local government of vital resources.

5.8 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am pleased to be called to speak in this important debate, and it is a pleasure to follow so many powerful speeches by Conservative Members.

Yet again, we heard it said from the Labour Front Bench that children in poverty will lose out in relation to free school meals. First, that is factually inaccurate: and, secondly, figures on poverty are often banded around in this place, but it is time we had a grown-up conversation about both poverty in general and child poverty in particular. So often, the Labour party uses relative poverty as a measure. When there is a recession, a fall in average earnings will of course mean that suddenly—hey presto!—children are lifted out of poverty: the poverty statistics improve. For example, in 2008, following Labour’s recession, there was a sharp reduction in the proportion of children in workless families living in relative poverty. Living standards had not improved and incomes had not increased, but, as a result of the measure that Labour used, suddenly children were lifted out of poverty. Conversely, when real wages rise, poverty rates increase, despite the fact that people’s incomes have not fallen.

It is time we had a grown-up conversation about this, because relying on that measure fails to tackle the root causes of poverty and could result in Governments pursuing skewed policies. Work remains the best route out of poverty, which is why I firmly support universal credit and these measures. These measures are part of a £1.5 billion package brought in by this Government. Frankly, I am surprised that Opposition Members will not support them this evening.

That brings me to free school meals. Children currently in receipt of free school meals will not lose out. In fact, 50,000 more children will benefit from free school meals than under the legacy benefits system. Free school meals should be targeted at the most vulnerable. It is not a fair allocation of resources that a family with a total income in excess of £40,000 is entitled to free school meals. Neither would it be right and proper to aim free school meals at 50% of children, yet that is what would happen if these measures are not allowed to proceed this evening. Free school meals should be targeted at the most disadvantaged. These measures will ensure that help is targeted at those who need it most, and that should attract support from both sides of the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I have to reduce the time limit to three minutes, because so many Members wish to speak.

5.12 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I have been texting my team furiously during the debate to check, double check and triple check that what I am about to say is accurate. I asked them to ring the DWP and the Library and then assure me that this is right. The vast majority of my constituents who currently receive tax credits are not on universal credit and will not be migrated on to it for some time, and they will not be protected by transitional arrangements, which will not apply. I have just checked this with the DWP and the Library. This is about the future denial of free schools meals, and it is valid that we have a conversation about that. I am not interested in embellishment in this debate, because the truth is enough.

For people who are in work and in poverty, or looking for work and in poverty, food is a huge part of their expenditure. It is a never-ending struggle to make sure
that there is enough to eat, and that children are getting enough to keep them healthy and well. Children cannot concentrate in school when they are hungry—we all know the arguments. For many young people, that one hot meal is all they will get. I have not been told, despite the claim being repeated time and again, what calculation was used to reach the figure of 50,000 for the number of extra children who will get free school meals. I am sorry, but I am just not able to believe that on a whim, or on a calculation that was plucked out of thin air.

Under the current system, families are normally entitled to free school meals if their income is under £16,190. That will be changed to £7,400 per year, unless it is covered by transitional protections. The reduction to £7,400 is, frankly, delusional. Who will it help? What is the figure based on? Which advisers, experts or charitable organisations have the Government met who actually think that slashing the threshold is a good idea for children in low-income households? The BBC rang around headteachers to try to get a quote on these changes, but not one headteacher knew about them, so what consultation has there been with schools?

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Pidcock: Time is very short, so I am certainly not going to give way to somebody who has intervened many times and was not here for the start of the debate.

Nearly 2,000 children in my constituency quite rightly—

Anna Soubry: Just for the record, Madam Deputy Speaker, I was in this place when the debate started.

Laura Pidcock: Well, that was not my experience. Anyway, the idea that claimants in my area—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I cannot hear the hon. Lady. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady should not shout from a sedentary position when I am defending her and giving her space.

Laura Pidcock: I have 17 seconds left and there have been so many interruptions.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. As a fellow north-easterner, I want her to be able to finish her point.

Laura Pidcock: There are 2,000 children in my constituency who rightly receive subsidised school meals. The reason that new claimants after 1 April will not be protected is not that they no longer need that protection or need those meals; it is due to arbitrary cuts. This change will ensure that more children are in poverty and that more people have to access food banks. The Government may be able to justify that in this Chamber, but how can they justify it to a child? Taking all the proposed changes together with all the changes that have already happened to the so-called social security system, the only conclusion I can draw is that there is no security anymore. That is not embellishment: I know poverty when I see it staring me in the face in my constituency surgeries. We do not need to lie, we do not need to embellish. The truth is good enough: these changes are shambolic.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): As a fellow north-easterner who also has a great deal of poverty in his constituency, perhaps I might be allowed to speak in this debate.

I will be blunt. I am tired of the Opposition playing games with this issue, not just today but over the preceding weeks and months. Let us be very clear: by 2022, 50,000 more children will have free school meals than is the case today. Nobody—not one child in any school, anywhere in our country—is going to lose the free school meal they currently receive. I must admit that I am somewhat surprised, even by the standards of the Labour party, by today’s claims. It was only a month ago, in response to a letter from me, that the chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir David Norgrove, wrote to rebuke the now former shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), about her use of statistics in this field. All the claims were found by the UK Statistics Authority not to be supported by statistics, or by the sources on which they purported to rely.

We can add today the frenzied assertion that universal credit will leave 1 million children without a free hot school meal. That is wrong, not just because of its flimsy attachment to reality, but because it creates needless anxiety in the communities we serve. We need to be very clear about why universal credit is being introduced in the first place. The hostile approach with which Labour has chosen to approach the issue is regrettable and damaging. It is not about what is right for the jobless or for the working poor in our society; it is about what is in the electoral interests of the Labour party.

The reality is that the professionals I have spoken to at the DWP have told me repeatedly that this system is working and that they believe it is doing the right thing by the people whom they serve. Women like Sindy Skelton—[Interruption.] Perhaps the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) wants to accuse Sindy of being a liar or of misleading me in some way, but I think that jobcentre staff up and down our country have every right to be angry at the way in which they are permanently castigated by Opposition Members as somehow the embodiment of a cruel and faceless state. Ministers have demonstrated time after time that they will take whatever action is necessary to make sure that universal credit delivers the outcomes we all want. If Labour is serious about helping people into work, and serious about supporting the most vulnerable in our society, it should give up the cheap posturing we have seen today. Many Labour Members know in their heart of hearts that they have over-embellished and laid things on a bit too thick. In the end, there is a serious debate to be had about poverty reduction.

Heidi Allen: Does my hon. Friend think that the number of Members on the Opposition Benches, and the lack of retaliation, means that they have realised that they have pushed it too far, and that they are now woefully out of their depth and just plain wrong?

Mr Clarke: My hon. Friend made a very powerful speech on this theme earlier. I think what she says is true. In fact, there is a pretty sparse attendance on the Opposition Benches, given that this was meant to be an
open goal. This was absolutely all about clips for the TV news, Facebook pages and Twitter—‘The heartless Tories ripping food out of the hands of kids.’ Well, that is not happening. None of us came into politics to make anyone’s lives worse. I am sick and tired of being told that we are somehow the bad guys because we believe in running a balanced economy and focusing on helping those in need, rather than trying to use them as political footballs to achieve political goals.

5.20 pm  Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): As the chair of the all-party group on universal credit, I want to lay out the facts of the measures for Members from across the House. I am very sorry that they have not been before Select Committees to allow them to look properly at the case. Unfortunately, the facts in the Government’s case are wrong. They claim that this is about parents of school-age children who are on about £7,400 a year and say that, with other benefits, those people will be on between £18,000 and £24,000 a year. However, according to the benefits calculator on the gov.uk website, we are thinking about a single parent with one school-age child who is on £14,200. She will be on the poverty line but will not be eligible for a free school meal. Under tax credits, a single parent would have been £1,600 a year better off. She will lose that money and her child will not be able to claim free school meals. She will be £25 a week worse off and will still have to pay around £11.25 a week towards school meals. She does not get a free school meal at the moment, but she can afford that, because she is on tax credits, which is a far more generous system.

This is the trouble with universal credit: it cuts an average of £1,300 a year from working single parents. At the moment, one in three of the children of these single parents is in poverty, Gingerbread, the Child Poverty Action Group, the Children’s Society, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Resolution Foundation all say that universal credit will increase the number of children in poverty over the next four years by 1 million. Not only will those children be in poverty, but now, thanks to a statutory instrument, they will not be able to claim free school meals. They will not get that hot, nutritious meal at lunchtime that will help them to concentrate throughout the day and to realise the levels of nutrition that they need. This also affects their eligibility for school trips through the pupil premium.

My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), the chair of the all-party group on school food, gave Education Ministers the proposal of decoupling the pupil premium to enable pupils to still be able to receive free school meals. Children might not be in poverty now and might not be receiving a free school meal, but they will be in poverty in four years’ time, thanks to the cuts introduced under universal credit. They will not be eligible for a free school meal either, and they should be. Not to make that change, not to look properly at it and go on figures about benefits that are wrong—to try to mislead the House with figures in a consultation document that are blatantly wrong about the people’s income—does a disservice to the 1 million children and the 280,000 families who will be on the cliff edge and seeing a disincentive to work. Across this House, we all want to see an incentive to work. Any parent with children who is earning between £7,400 and around £11,000 a year will not be better off in work.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend mentioned decoupling the pupil premium. Under the Digital Economy Act 2017, that is now possible. Schools already know how to claim pupil premium for the universal infant free school meals offer. Does she agree that we are totally able to decouple the two?

Ruth George: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. In a Westminster Hall debate a few weeks ago, Conservative Members said it was because of the cost of the pupil premium that they did not want free school meals extended, and that we could therefore set the pupil premium at the level proposed by the Government. We must, however, make sure that every child in poverty is entitled to the free school meals they need so that they have a better chance in school and better life chances, and to ensure that we try to eradicate child hunger instead of increasing it.

5.24 pm  Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): We are here to improve lives and to raise the sum of human happiness. We know that the best way out of poverty is work and that purposeful work is the key to human happiness, and we all want to give kids the best possible start in life, which includes meals for the poorest and high-quality pre-school childcare, which we know improves outcomes for the most disadvantaged children in our country.

We know, too, that universal credit is helping to improve lives. It has been on offer in my constituency for some time and has now been fully rolled out. The feedback I get from the jobcentres that serve my constituency—job coaches tell me this with great passion—is that it is helping them to help people, and helping people to get into work, increase their hours and find better work. It is overwhelmingly a good thing. I spoke to my local citizens advice bureau to find out what problems it was experiencing, following rumours that universal credit was causing trouble, and on the day I went in, there had been two calls about universal credit. I asked what they were. One was, “How can I get it?” and the other was, “Am I eligible?” So people were calling the CAB because they wanted to be on universal credit, because they had heard good things about it. I am therefore really concerned that we are hearing such misleading information in the Chamber, when we know that universal credit is helping people to get into work, stay in work and find better work.

The Government have listened to and addressed concerns about universal credit, for instance by giving people better access to advance payments and not making them wait for payments. The Government are doing exactly the right thing to make universal credit work even better, and Labour Members should be supporting that, not trying to block it. I am worried that they are stuck in the 1970s. Perhaps then it was okay to give up on people and condemn them to a life on benefits, but we know now that is not the right thing to do. They should be supporting us to help their constituents to get into work and stay in work.

On free school meals, we have seen a shocking abuse of figures. We know that as a result of the Government’s policies, 50,000 more children will get free school meals and no child will lose their right to them, so let us not have any scaremongering about children losing free school meals. Let us also have a bit more clarity about
how Labour might pay for their proposals which, according to latest estimates, would cost the country an extra £100 billion and increase borrowing per family by £4,000. I say to Labour Members, “Let us do the right thing.” Let us not play party politics, but help to make people’s lives better.

5.27 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am mindful of the time, so I will not take up as much of it as I had planned.

It is disappointing that there are now few ways in which the House can express its opinion, but one of those ways is by our debating and voting on statutory instruments. We see time and again on Opposition days the House making its voice clear. In October, the House voted by 299 votes to zero to call for a halt to the roll-out of universal credit, but that did not happen. Conservative Members talk about parliamentary sovereignty and the will of the House being listened to, but they do not then follow through. I am glad, therefore, that we have an opportunity today, on a binding vote, to make our view clear to the Government.

Today we are debating four statutory instruments. I will focus on the one relating to universal credit, but before I do so, I want to touch on childcare vouchers. I and many other Members are worried about the UK Government’s plans to close the childcare voucher scheme, so we urge them to reconsider. I want to draw a contrast with some of the family-friendly policies that we are pursuing north of the border, such as the baby box scheme, which gives children the very best start in life from birth—that sends a strong signal about equality. We have free school meals for children in primaries 1 to 3 and the doubling of childcare provision. On the latter, I must declare an interest, as my son is starting nursery in August, and is very excited about going to Sgòil Àraich Lyoncross. The Scottish Government have made it clear that children should be able to get such childcare, and it is good that we are delivering on that.

I wish to commend the new city government in Glasgow led by Susan Aitken. In the last council budget, they announced that free school meals would be rolled out to primary 4. As someone who is married to a primary school teacher, I know at first hand the importance of schoolchildren having a warm and nutritious meal inside them. I welcome the efforts of Glasgow City Council to tackle holiday hunger as well.

I will focus briefly on universal credit, because I am mindful of the time. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), who has done a power of work on universal credit since long before it was fashionable to talk about it. He has, I believe, been pursuing the issue since 2013. I think that his work on terminal illness is especially important. There have been some pretty unedifying scenes on both sides of the Chamber today. We should be mindful of the fact that we are talking about real people, and, in particular, about people with terminal illnesses. That message should go to all of us, including me.

I have made it clear to journalists that I have no interest in being on “Newsnight” or “Question Time”, or in clocking up views in Nigeria on YouTube like my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black). I see the job of being a Member of Parliament as being out in the constituency listening to people and hearing about lived experiences. I appreciate that at various points during the debate, the Government will say that the Opposition are scaremongering, and they can say that to a certain extent—they would be expected to say it. However, as a constituency Member of Parliament, I speak to constituents regularly, and people at the Parkhead housing association, the West of Scotland housing association and the Glasgow NE food bank say that universal credit must be halted.

5.31 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I have a qualified welcome for this important debate. I will touch briefly on universal credit and free school meals.

On universal credit, I welcome what has been done by the Chancellor and a succession of Secretaries of State. Universal credit is there to get people into work and to ensure that, when they are in work, they can take on more work, make progress in their careers and, ideally, cease to be dependent on welfare payments. That is what we want to happen, and the system has been reformed over the years to become better and better.

I have very little time, but I want to highlight the speech made by my hon. Friend. I think that the Labour party is not the only one with a fraction of the actual income. I was blown away by their support for it. They can help people now: rather than being faceless, grey, stand-offish organisations, they can engage with people in a way that has not been possible for them before. We should support universal credit enthusiastically—and, yes, where improvements need to be made, let us make them.

On free school meals, we ought to have a vision that the children who are most in need should receive them, but they should not be received by the children of those who are earning a significantly higher amount of money. It is disappointing that Labour Members will vote today to prevent 50,000 children—the poorest children in our country—from receiving free school meals when universal credit is rolled out and will vote to ensure that families with an income of more than £40,000 a year continue to receive them. I think that the Labour party has the wrong values, but it is not just the Labour party: in my constituency, the Liberal Democrats have been putting out propaganda saying that the children of those who earn more than £7,400 a year will no longer receive free school meals. That is not a cut-off; it is only a fraction of the actual income.

Because of the time constraint, I will end my speech by saying that I support the Government and their actions.

5.35 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I would like to feel able to thank every Member who has spoken in the debate, but, frankly, the only meals Tory Members are interested
in are when their rich donors pay them to have them. Those are the only meals they are interested in. [Interruption.] That is all they are interested in.

Several hon. Members rose—

Peter Dowd: We have been asked today to tell the truth: I have just told the truth, and the truth hurts as far as Tory Members are concerned. [Interruption.] The four statutory instruments we are debating today—

Several hon. Members rose—

Peter Dowd: That has upset Tory Members; they are deeply upset about it. The four statutory instruments taken together would end childcare vouchers, restrict the number of children receiving free school meals and limit access to universal credit for the self-employed and disabled people.

Rachel Maclean: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Dowd: No, I will not.

Far from seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, this Government have indicated once more their relentless desire to throw some of the poorest into the shade. While the Chancellor came to the House today to pat himself on the back, with no sense of irony whatsoever, these new regulations remind us that austerity is far from over. Depriving some of the poorest children in the country access to a free school meal on its own would be considered shameful, but paired with the restriction on childcare vouchers and the introduction of tougher criteria for universal credit, we have a cruel cocktail of cuts and misery—and Tory Members know a lot about cocktails as well when they are at their meals.

The Children’s Society estimates—[Interruption.] Fact check: the Children’s Society estimates that the changes the measures the Government are seeking to introduce will see 1 million children in poverty unable to benefit from free school meals because of them pulling the rug on the current transitional arrangements, and to add insult to injury, by setting an income threshold for the children of those on universal credit to qualify for free school meals, the Government are creating a cliff-hanger which will leave around 350,000 families worse off. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Members must not shout at the hon. Gentleman.

Peter Dowd: Over the past five years, this tax cut has cost the British taxpayer £8.4 billion. That £8.4 billion could instead have fully funded universal credit, extended free school meals or ensured tax-free childcare for all. Fact check: that is a fact.

Childcare remains the biggest cost for working households. For some families, the childcare bill is crippling their finances. The childcare voucher scheme is not only popular but well subscribed, with some 780,000 parents using vouchers and more than 50,000 employers offering childcare voucher schemes. Most employers who provide vouchers currently do so through salary sacrifice schemes, exempting recipients from income tax and national insurance on vouchers up to a maximum of £55 a week. The scheme has its flaws—for example, it does not cover self-employed people and requires employers to be registered—but overall, most parents and employers who use the scheme believe that the system works, and an overwhelming majority want it to stay. There is another fact check.

It is not really surprising that the Government are planning to pass regulations this evening that would close the scheme to new applicants, particularly considering their shambolic introduction of the alternative tax-free childcare scheme. The Government’s much-vaunted tax-free childcare scheme opened to parents this year, a full five years since it was originally announced. [Interruption.] That is another fact that Conservative Members do
not like. To call the roll-out disastrous would be a grave understatement. On top of the delays, HMRC’s website crashed, forcing the Government to pay nearly £1 million to parents in lieu of childcare payments. Hardly a great start! Under the current voucher system, the amount of childcare a family gets is tied to their earnings. Under the new system, it is based instead on expenditure, so the childcare system will benefit those who can afford to spend the most, with the Government’s headline figure of £2,000 tax free reserved for those parents who have an extra £10,000 lying around.

It is well known that the tax-free childcare scheme is the pet project of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. She has consistently called for better value for money when it comes to public spending and said that the Government should avoid spending money that they do not have. However, under the new scheme, parents sending their children to independent schools will also be able to claim the £2,000 tax-free amount for childcare. How can the Chief Secretary justify that? Surely, the money spent giving a tax break to those who can afford to send their children to some of the most expensive fee-paying schools in the country could instead be used to ensure that a million children do not lose access to free school meals. There is no reason why the Government should not listen to the calls of the Opposition, of parents and of employers across the country who want to keep the voucher scheme open and extend it to the self-employed.

I should like to turn now to the Local Authority (Duty to Secure Early Years Provision Free of Charge) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 and the Universal Credit (Miscellaneous Amendments, Saving and Transitional Provision) Regulations 2018. As we have heard, the first of these instruments creates new eligibility criteria for families applying for 15 hours of free childcare for their two-year-old through universal credit—

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman is not going to give way. Please allow him to finish.

Peter Dowd: The facts do rile them, don’t they? They have asked for facts all afternoon. Then they get a few

5.45 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): We have had fully 24 Back-Bench speeches in this debate, and I will seek to respond to as many as I can in the short time available. There are five main elements to our support in early years and childcare, and each one is a bigger offer than under Labour. First, there are 15 hours a week of free early education for disadvantaged two-year-olds. There was no such entitlement under Labour. Today’s regulations amend the eligibility criteria, introducing an equivalent savings threshold of £15,400, which typically equates to somewhere between £24,000 and £32,000 in total household income. By 2023, we estimate that around 7,000 more children will benefit from the entitlement compared with the previous system.

Secondly, there is the universal 15 hours a week free childcare for three and four-year-olds—more hours than under Labour and now with the early years pupil premium, which was also not available under Labour. Thirdly, there are an additional 15 hours for working parents, and guess what? No such offer existed before 2010. Fourthly, up to 85% of childcare costs can be reimbursed through universal credit, which is a higher percentage than was ever available under tax credits. Finally, tax-free childcare will provide support for nearly 1 million more families than the existing vouchers scheme.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Given the concerns raised across the House about the April closure of the childcare vouchers scheme, does the Secretary of State agree that the closure should be delayed to allow for those concerns to be addressed?

Damian Hinds: I have heard the concerns about the timing, and I can confirm that, following the hon. Lady’s representations, we will be able to keep the voucher scheme open to new entrants for a further six months.

Tax-free childcare will mean that more people become eligible, regardless of their employer and including the self-employed for the first time. The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) raised concerns about families having to pay childcare costs up front, but I reassure her that the flexible support fund is available to help in such cases.

Lucy Powell: Will the Secretary of State give way on that point?

Damian Hinds: I am short of time, so if the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will come back to her if there is time.

Turning to free school meals, we have extended the availability of free meals since 2010, going much further than Labour. The Conservative-led coalition extended free meals to disadvantaged students in further education institutions and introduced universal infant free school meals. We are investing £26 million in a breakfast club programme over the next three years, using the soft drinks industry levy.

When universal credit was introduced, we made clear our intention to set new criteria for free school meals, as my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) rightly pointed out. We stated that intention in our response to the Social Security Advisory Committee report on passported benefits in March 2012. We repeated it in April 2013, when we introduced a temporary measure enabling all universal credit families to receive free school meals during the early phase of universal credit, and we have repeated it again several times since,
as my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) mentioned. We are now, as we always planned, introducing new eligibility criteria to ensure that those entitlements continue to benefit those who need them the most.

Under our new regulations, we estimate that by 2022 around 50,000 more children will benefit from a free school meal compared with the previous system. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who is shaking her head, asked about the methodology, as did the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) and, I believe, the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock). We responded to the Social Security Advisory Committee on that exact point, and it put the information into the public domain.

Lucy Powell: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Damian Hinds: I cannot. No child who is receiving free meals now or who gained them during the roll-out of universal credit will lose their entitlement during the roll-out, even if family earnings rise above the threshold, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) and for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) mentioned. Once roll-out is complete, those children will be protected until the end of their phase of education—primary or secondary—as my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) reminded us.

The protection arrangements will enable hundreds of thousands of children to continue to receive a meal during the roll-out, even if family earnings exceed the threshold. The £7,400 threshold relates to earned income, and it does not include additional incomings through universal credit. Depending on their exact circumstances, a typical family earning around our threshold would have a total annual household income of between £18,000 and £24,000.

The hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) said that the threshold was arbitrary. It is not arbitrary: the thresholds for these passported benefits are set at such a level as to hold the eligibility cohort steady, except that in the case of free school meals we took the decision to make it somewhat more generous than the previous system. The threshold is comparable, by the way, to that in the approach in Scotland, where there is a net earnings threshold equivalent of £7,320.

It is simply not true to say that we are introducing a cliff edge; there has always been one. The simple fact is that a child either gets a lunch or does not. A plate of food does not lend itself well to being tapered, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) has said. Some have suggested that we could convert the benefit into cash—that is true, of course—so that we could have a taper, but the whole point of free school meals is to guarantee that an individual child will receive a nutritious and healthy lunch.

Extending eligibility to all children in households on universal credit would result in around half of pupils becoming eligible. We estimate that that would cost in excess of £3 billion a year more by 2022. The additional meal costs alone, excepting the deprivation funding, would be in excess of £450 million a year—quite close to the figure mentioned by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West. I reiterate that eligibility is going up, not down, as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) said.

I am running short of time, so I will turn to the regulations on universal credit. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions earlier outlined the changes in these regulations for UC. They include the removal of waiting days, which will put an average of £160 extra in people's pockets and get them into the monthly routine sooner, and an additional two weeks of housing benefit to smooth the transition to universal credit. That one-off, additional, non-recoverable payment is worth an average of £233 to 2.3 million claimants over the roll-out period. Those measures form part of the £1.5 billion package of reforms that the Chancellor announced at the Budget. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) said that he was surprised to hear that Labour Members would be voting against those measures. I suggest that their constituents will be even more surprised.

Paul Masterton: Wil my right hon. Friend give way?

Damian Hinds: I hope my hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not; we are very short of time. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) reminded us in her unique style, the Government are committed to tackling injustices, removing barriers and widening opportunity. Because of the strong economic management that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor recapped for us earlier, we are able to continue our bold and ambitious programme of social reform extremely quickly.

Emma Little Pengelly: Can the Secretary of State confirm clearly for the House—that is very important—that the six-month delay in the closure of the childcare voucher scheme will be used to address concerns and issues that have been raised in the House today?

Damian Hinds: I already confirmed that we would have this period to reflect concerns and to allow the bed-in.

Our approach is working, including through advances in education, ensuring everyone can get the best start, unprecedented investment in childcare to support career choices and household budgets and universal credit, helping people into work, faster. In this generation, we have employment at record levels, household incomes at record levels and income inequality down. For the next generation, we have major improvements in the early years foundation stages, 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools and a 10% narrowing in attainment between the rich and poor. Today's legislation continues this important work. I am proud of the enhanced support we are offering families through these programmes, and I commend the regulations to the House.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 288, Noes 315.

Division No. 128

[5.55 pm]

Ayes

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amsbury, Mike
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barclay, Anna
Barron, Mr James
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Bevins, Rhona
Benn, rh Hilary
Black, Mrs Sanchia
Black, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Black, Mrs Sanchia
Black, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Statutory Instruments (Motions to Annul)

13 MARCH 2018

Adams, Nigel
Afzali, Saeed
Afoley, Bimight
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter

Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorin, Anna
Mears, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Laila
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
O’Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Pidcock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Elle
Reeves, Rachel

Reynolds, Emma
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
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Graham
Snel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starrer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewlis, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes: Vicky Foxcroft and Jeff Smith

NOES

Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
The House having divided:

**Empties**

The Tellers for the Noes:

Wendy Morton and Mike Freer

**AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Alien-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amess, Mike
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

**EAGLES**

Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ellmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glinndon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
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
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kilien, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laid, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarty, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
Mclnnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
Mahon, Jim
McMornin, Anna
Mears, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
O’Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Philipson, Bridget
Pidcock, 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, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruanu, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PERSONS**

**Motion made, and Question put,**

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying for the grant of a lump sum of £127,000,000 (in full discharge of the deficiency) for the years Finance (Amendments Relating to Universal Credit) (England) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 148), dated 6 February, a copy of which was laid before this House on 7 February, be annulled.

(Angeia Rayner.)

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I remind the House that this motion is subject to double-majority voting: of the whole House and of Members representing constituencies in England.

The House having divided: Ayes 254, Noes 312.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England: Ayes 214, Noes 282.

Division No. 129

[6.10 pm]
811 812

Cash, Sir William
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Burt, Alistair
Burns, Conor
Burghart, Alex
Buckland, Robert
Brokenshire, James
Brine, Steve
Brooksbank, Sarah
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William

Thornberry, Emily
Timms, Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
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, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes: Vicky Foxcroft and Jeff Smith

Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, Dr Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, Dr Liam
Francois, Dr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Dr Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, Dr Nick
Gillan, Dr Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, Dr Mark
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, Dr Chris
Green, Chris
Green, Dr Damian
Greening, Dr Justine
Grieve, Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, Dr Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Dr Mark
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Dr Matt
Hands, Dr Greg
Harper, Dr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, Dr Mark
Heald, Dr Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, Dr Nick
Hinds, Dr Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Dr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, Dr Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Dr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margaret
Javid, Dr Sajid
Jayawardena, Dr Ranil
Jenkin, Dr Mark
Jenks, Dr Andy
Jenrick, Dr Robert
Johnson, Dr Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Dr Gagan
Johnson, Dr Joseph

Jones, Andrew
Jones, Dr Mark
Jones, Dr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegans, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Dr Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Dr Mark
Leadsom, Dr Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Dr Edward
Letwin, Dr Mark
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, Dr Brandon
Lewis, Dr Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Dr Ian
Lidington, Dr Mr David
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Dr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Dr Katherine
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, Dr Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, Dr Mr Patrick
McVey, Dr Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Dr John
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millin, Amanda
Mills, Dr Nigel
Milon, Dr Anne
Mitchell, Dr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, Dr Penny
Morgan, Dr Nicky
Morris, Dr Anne Marie
Morris, Dr David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Dr Caroline
Norman, Dr Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, Dr Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, Dr Mr Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Phillips, Corin
Pincher, Dr Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca

Adams, Nigel
Afroze, Sir Abida
Ainslie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Dr Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Sir Richard
Badenoch, Dr Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Balakrishnan, Dr Ranil
Barclay, Dr Stephen
Baron, Dr Mark
Bebb, Dr Guto
Bellingham, Dr Sir Henry
Benyon, Dr Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Dr Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Dr Mr Peter
Bottomley, Dr Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, Dr Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenbrow, Dr James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Dr Conor
Burt, Dr Alistair
Cairns, Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William

Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishilt, Rehaman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, Colin
Clark, Dr Greg
Clarke, Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Dr Simon
Clevaerly, James
Clifton-Brown, Dr Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Therese
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Dr Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, Dr Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, Dr David T C
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Drs Maria
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Dr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
Dodds, Dr Nick
Donaldson, Dr Sir Jeffrey M
Dolanel, Michelle
Double, Dr Steve
Downen, Dr Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, Dr Nick
Duncan, Dr Sir Alan
Duncan, Dr Mark
Dunne, Dr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, Dr Mr Tobias
Eldridge, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Dr Nick
Evennett, Dr David

Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, Dr Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, Dr Liam
Francois, Dr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Dr Mark
Ghani, Dr Nusrat
Gibb, Dr Nick
Gillan, Dr Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Dr Robert
Gove, Dr Mark
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Dr Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, Dr Chris
Green, Dr Chris
Green, Dr Damian
Greening, Dr Justine
Grieve, Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Dr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, Dr Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Dr Mark
Hammond, Dr Stephen
Hancock, Dr Matt
Hands, Dr Greg
Harper, Dr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, Dr Mr John
Heald, Dr Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, Dr Nick
Hinds, Dr Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Dr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, Dr Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Dr Nick
Jack, Dr Alister
James, Margaret
Javid, Dr Sajid
Jayawardena, Dr Ranil
Jenkin, Dr Mark
Jenks, Dr Andy
Jenrick, Dr Robert
Johnson, Dr Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Dr Gagan
Johnson, Dr Joseph

Jones, Andrew
Jones, Dr Mr David
Jones, Dr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegans, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Dr Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Dr Mark
Leadsom, Dr Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Dr Edward
Letwin, Dr Mr Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, Dr Brandon
Lewis, Dr Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Dr Ian
Lidington, Dr Mr David
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Dr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Dr Katherine
Mann, Dr Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, Dr Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, Dr Mr Patrick
McVey, Dr Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Dr John
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Dr Stephen
Millin, Amanda
Mills, Dr Nigel
Milon, Dr Anne
Mitchell, Dr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, Dr Penny
Morgan, Dr Nicky
Morris, Dr Anne Marie
Morris, Dr David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Dr Caroline
Norman, Dr Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, Dr Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, Dr Mr Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Phillips, Corin
Pincher, Dr Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Question accordingly negatived.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PERSONS

Motion made, and Question put.

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Local Authority (Duty to Secure Early Years Provision Free of Charge) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 146), dated 6 February, a copy of which was laid before this House on 7 February, be annulled.—(Angela Rayner.)

The House proceeded to a Division.

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER (MRS ELEANOR LAING): I remind the House that this motion is subject to double-majority voting: of the whole House and of Members representing constituencies in England.

The House having divided: Ayes 253, Noes 315.

The House divided: Ayes 215, Noes 283.

Division No. 130

AYES

[6.26 pm]

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Sym, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tillhurst, 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
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Jo Churchill and Mike Freer

Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffee, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry

George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Haran, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Heron, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
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
Keelley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Baron, Mr John
Barclay, Stephen
Baker, Mr Steve
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Bacon, Mr Richard
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sherriff, Paula
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Sue
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smirn, Kath
Snell, Gerrah
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Gerrah
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twig, Derek
Twig, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and Jeff Smith

Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carrilidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishi, Reham
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colm
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Therese
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evannett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac

Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gymah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollonbole, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margaret
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Kasegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, rh Philip
Leffrey, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tellers for the Ayes</th>
<th>Tellers for the Noes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbott, rh Dr Julian</td>
<td>Zahawi, Nadhim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abrahams, Debbie</td>
<td>Wragg, Mr William</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alexander, Heidi</td>
<td>Wood, Mike</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ali, Rushanara</td>
<td>Wollaston, Dr Sarah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena</td>
<td>Wilson, rh Sammy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amesbury, Mike</td>
<td>Williamson, rh Gavin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashworth, Jonathan</td>
<td>Wilson, rh Sammy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austin, Ian</td>
<td>Wilson, rh Sammy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailey, Mr Adrian</td>
<td>Wollaston, Dr Sarah</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Barr, Mr B
| Beckett, rh Margare | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Benn, rh Hilary | Whittaker, Craig |
| Black, Mhairi | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Blackford, rh Ian | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Blackman, Kirsty | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Blomfield, Paul | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Brabin, Tracy | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Brake, rh Tom | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Brennan, Kevin | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Brock, Deidre | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Brown, Alan | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Brown, Lyn | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Brown, rh Mr Nicholas | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Bryant, Chris | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Buck, Ms Karen | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Burden, Richard | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Burgon, Richard | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Cable, rh Sir Vince | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Cadbury, Ruth | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Cameron, Dr Lisa | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Campbell, rh Mr Alan | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Campbell, Mr Ronnie | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Carden, Dan | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Champion, Sarah | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Chapman, Douglas | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Chapman, Jenny | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Charalamous, Bambos | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Cherry, Joanna | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Clwyd, rh Ann | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Coaker, Vernon | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Coffey, Ann | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Cooper, Julie | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Cooper, Rosie | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Cooper, rh Yvette | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Corbyn, rh Jeremy | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Coyle, Neil | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Crausby, Sir David | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Crawley, Angela | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Creasy, Stella | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Cruddas, Jon | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Cryer, John | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Cummins, Judith | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Cunningham, Alex | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Cunningham, Mr Jim | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Dakin, Nic | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Davey, rh Sir Edward | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |

SOCIAL SECURITY

Motion made, and Question put,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Social Security (Contributions) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 120), dated 31 January, a copy of which was laid before this House on 1 February, be annulled.—(Angela Rayner.)


Division No. 131

AYES

David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhewi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Dougherty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lillian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Tellers for the Ayes: Vicky Foxcroft and Jeff Smith

NOES

Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyly-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dudtridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Givans, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris

Adams, Nigel
Afzal, Bim
Afridi, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, rh 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, rh Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Breer, Andrew
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenhurst, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carling, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto

McMorrin, Anna
McManus, Jim
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mears, 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'Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Peach, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Philipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faizal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Rees, Elie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rooda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruan, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saiville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewlis, Alison
Thomas, Kairen
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomson, rh Emily

Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellerrf the NOES: Vicky Foxcroft and Jeff Smith

NOES

Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyly-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dudtridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Givans, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
investigated. Newspapers today are in a very different position that the world has changed. Practices such as these have been "the fact that this activity stopped in 2010 underlines the point saying that death. The Secretary of State justified the decision by explaining what will now happen during and after that period?

I ask your opinion, Mr Speaker, on any suggestion from the Government that there will be an oral statement therefore on the record for all to see.

I am not a ware of any intention for a statement to be attempt to solicit my opinion will not be successful. I new allegations that contradict that information. The blagger says that he knows individuals who are still engaged in these activities on behalf of the Secretary of State has no evidential basis on which to make his rather complacent assertion.

Angela Rayner: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is clear that the Secretary of State has survived the Division by promising not to press ahead with the Government’s plans to phase out childcare vouchers for another six months, along with other new childcare measures. May I ask your opinion, Mr Speaker, on any suggestion from the Government that there will be an oral statement explaining what will now happen during and after that period?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. I am not aware of any intention for a statement to be made, but the hon. Lady has aired her concern, and it is therefore on the record for all to see.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last week the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport announced his intention to drop the Levenson inquiry despite new revelations from The Sunday Times whistleblower John Ford, including the obtaining of stolen data on the private information of Dr David Kelly a week before his death. The Secretary of State justified the decision by saying that “the fact that this activity stopped in 2010 underlines the point that the world has changed. Practices such as these have been investigated. Newspapers today are in a very different position from when the alleged offences took place.”—[Official Report, 7 March 2018, Vol. 637, c. 326.]

I have just received new allegations that contradict that information. The blagger says that he knows individuals who are still engaged in these activities on behalf of newspapers. The Secretary of State has no evidential basis on which to make his rather complacent assertion.
Have you had notice of a statement from the Secretary of State, Mr Speaker, so that he can justify what evidence he has to say that blagging ended in national newspapers in 2010?

Mr Speaker: I have not received any such indication, I must advise the hon. Gentleman, but he has registered his concern and it will have been heard on the Treasury Bench.

Hemel Hempstead Urgent Care Centre

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

6.56 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): First, may I say what a privilege it is to have secured this Adjournment debate this evening, and how proud I am of my constituents who for so many years have been fighting the changes and particularly the cuts to healthcare in the Dacorum area where my constituency sits? In particular, I thank Edie and Ron Glatter and the Dacorum Hospital Action Group and its fantastic chair Betty Harris, who is very poorly; they have been fighting this campaign for many years. I also pay tribute to the fantastic work our local BBC radio station, BBC Three Counties, has done over the years, in particular that of the excellent journalist and reporter Justin Dealey; without his work, this debate would probably not have taken place.

For the national health service to carry on being the world-class service it is today, the public, our constituents, need to have faith not only in the fantastic doctors, nurses and porters and those who run the frontline services, but in the management of our hospitals and health provision. I am sorry to say, however, that the trust and feeling of commitment we need from our health service management in our part of the world are not just broken, but have completely failed.

I will not go into the history because tonight I want to talk about the urgent care centre, but the history of what has been happening to out-of-hours and urgent care, including A&E, in my constituency has been going on for many years. The previous Labour Administration decided to close the A&E and all acute services at the Hemel hospital after they had already been closed at the St Albans hospital, with all services moved into a Victorian hospital next to a football ground in Watford. We will not dwell on that tonight, however, but will come back to it on another evening.

As part of the sop to my community, we were given an urgent care centre—24/7, seven days a week, throughout the day and night—and next to it a walk-in GP centre. I was therefore surprised when Ms Fisher, chief executive of the West Hertfordshire Hospitals Trust, phoned me just before Christmas to say that, sadly, the urgent care centre would have to temporarily close on safety grounds at night. I was shocked by that, not least because the A&E in Watford struggles greatly, so the more people we can encourage to use other NHS facilities instead, the better. I said, “This is happening over Christmas which is one of the busy times,” and was told, “Don’t worry, Mr Penning, it’s only a temporary thing and we’ll have it open again just after Christmas.” They then put out a press release headed “Temporary overnight closure of Hemel Hempstead Urgent Care Centre”. Interestingly, that press release is still on their website today. I actually printed it off before I came into the Chamber this evening. As I go through my comments, Members will realise just how false that statement was.

One of my constituents then contacted Three Counties Radio, and Justin Dealey, its excellent reporter—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)
Sir Mike Penning: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have even longer to pontificate, which is great news.

Justin Deailey acquired an interview with the said Ms Fisher, the chief executive of West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust. It was quite a long interview, in which Ms Fisher indicated:

“This is a short-term measure which is us acting in the interest of patient safety because, for the next few weeks over the festive period, we are unable to secure GP cover.”

I think most people would understand that, but not if they knew that the GPs were working in the room next door. But that is a separate issue. Justin went on to suggest that surely Ms Fisher understood that local constituents would have real concerns, and asked her whether she would be concerned if she lived in the area.

She said:

“I completely understand their concerns, but what I want to reassure the residents of Hemel is that if there were to be any permanent change it would be our absolute intention to include people fully”

in that decision. She went on to say that

“legally we would be obliged to consult for a permanent change of that nature.”

That press release was issued not before Christmas this year but in December 2016. We have had no night provision at all in Hemel since then. Everybody has to go for urgent treatment to Watford A&E. Alternatively, they have to dial 111, which is an excellent service, but after they have been triaged they apparently get sent to Watford A&E. Watford has just come out of special measures, and I praise the work that has been done at the hospital but there is still a lot more to be done.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I sought his permission to intervene on him beforehand. He is outlining very well the issue with the Hemel Hempstead urgent care centre. Does he agree that, although there is immense staffing pressure, closing or scaling back on urgent care units and minor injury units only adds to the pressure on A&Es? There must be more investment in these mid-level centres if we are to prevent the A&Es from crumbling under the weight of the work they have to do.

Sir Mike Penning: I clearly agree with my hon. Friend. It was kind of him to come and tell me that he wanted to intervene on me on behalf of other parts of the country that are facing similar pressures.

This was not about money. Normally, when our constituents come to talk to us, especially about the health service, it is about money. They tell us that they are really concerned that there is not enough money to provide the services, but on this occasion we were told that this was nothing to do with money. It was to do with the contractual problem with the GPs. We kept on asking what was going to happen, and then—completely out of the blue and still without consultation—we were told that the Government had said that there should be no more urgent care centres and that they should become urgent treatment centres instead. I was repeatedly told that it was the Government saying that this should be done. I asked whether the Government had said that the centre should not be open 24/7. I was told no, but that we had to move to being an urgent treatment centre. In the past couple of weeks, the unit has changed from being an urgent care centre to being an urgent treatment centre. Interestingly enough, that means that paramedics and nurse practitioners are running the facility, and in many cases—without being rude to our GPs—they have more skills than a basic GP. I have to declare an interest, in that I was a military paramedic, so I am slightly biased about these things.

Was there a consultation before that decision was made, not just to close the UCC but to change to a UTC? No, there was not, even though it is a legal requirement to have one. We are now in a consultation, however. I could not believe it when I first heard this, but I have now heard from several constituents that in the actual meetings that took place—not when people were writing in—when different plans and options were being put to my constituents, a member of the clinical commissioning group staff was at the table trying to convince the public what sort of option they should go for. If we are going to consult the public, surely we should trust them and then have the confidence to listen to them.

What I find really fascinating about what is happening in my part of the world is that people from nowhere near my constituency—from the other side of Watford—are being consulted. They would never come to my facility in a million years—unless they just happen to be in the area—but they apparently have the same rights in this consultation as my constituents, who are again losing facilities hand over fist. Those other views are being taken into consideration because they happen to be part of the trust area. My constituents just scratch their heads and say, “This is illogical.” This facility, even though it is part of the NHS and anybody could come to it, is obviously being used by the largest town in Hertfordshire and the other towns and villages within Dacorum. However, I have no problem with the people of St Albans being consulted over this, because they are clearly part of the process.

Trust has been severely damaged. A highly paid chief executive of an NHS trust went on the radio—telling an MP is one thing, but going public is another—and tells listeners, “This is temporary. Please do not worry; it will all be okay. By the way, if I did actually change the service, that would be illegal because I have not consulted.” Frankly, when they then did not consult—the UCC is quite clearly never going to open again—that breaks the trust.

I have raised the accountability issue in the House before. It is absolutely right that my good friend the Minister on the Front Bench does not make decisions about what A&Es and UCCs are open and how many beds there should be. Those are quite clearly clinical decisions that should be based on knowledge and demand in the area—that is not what happened when our A&E was closed—but we seem to have moved from one extreme to another. I am told that if we want to challenge the consultation, the only way is to put the decision to judicial review based on the consultation. We tried that when the A&E was closed and we got a judicial review. The judge was generous and said, “You have a moral case, but you probably don’t have a clinical case. You don’t have a case in law, because the consultation was done.” However, if the consultation was a complete sham or did not take place at all, where do we go?

I have asked Ministers. I have tabled questions and I have been to see the Secretary of State. At the end of the day, who are these people accountable to? I know that
we can go to the health committees at the local council, but they do not have the powers to say that an individual or a trust has brought the NHS into disrepute, and yet that is what has happened here. Nobody was twisting the chief executive’s arm to go on the radio and say what she said. We all listened to it—I got a transcript the following morning—and I sat with Justin and said, “Well, that’s it, Justin. We’re okay.” I was not at all happy about the facility being closed over the 2016 Christmas period, but at least we knew that GPs were going to be recruited and that we were going to get there.

However, the exact opposite has happened. We are not getting the GPs back, and now the facility being open 24 hours a day is only one of the options. I know that the Minister’s notes will say how many people used to go to it at night and so on, but half the problem was that it was never properly promoted. There are access issues at the A&E because so many people are turning up and being triaged when a huge percentage of them do not need to be at an A&E but somewhere else within the NHS. I would argue that they should be at a UCC or UTC or that a GP should come out to them, but that is a separate issue because hardly any GPs make home visits in my constituency.

I know exactly how things work, because I was a Minister for a while and know about the advice that comes down from the trust and the clinical commissioning group, which will say things that are different from what I have said. However, I can honestly say that if there is one issue in my constituency that absolutely unites every political persuasion on my patch, it is the acute health provision in my constituency. We pushed a coffin on a hospital trolley all the way from Hemel Hempstead Hospital to Watford, to indicate that lives would be lost. We had debate after debate with the ambulance service, which said, “Don’t worry, we can get the ambulances there on time.” It probably could, if it rushed them through on a blue light in the middle of the night—if an ambulance was available. Because of the previous Administration’s botching of the regionalisation of the ambulance service, there are often not that many ambulances available, even though the ambulance depot is on my patch.

People do not want to clog up A&E; they want to have the confidence that there is somewhere safe that they and their kids can go for treatment. We have no idea what the conclusion of this retrospective consultation will be. We have no faith that even if the conclusions are in agreement with what we want, we will actually get it. Not all my constituents agree with me, but in a treatment centre I would rather have a highly qualified paramedic nurse practitioner than—I have to choose my words carefully here—an ordinary GP, simply because the paramedic nurse practitioner has so much experience in that area. That is where the modernisation of the health service has been so brilliant. But after telling me that the decision was not about money, it is, frankly, disgusting to sit people down at consultation meetings and try to convince them that it would be better if the centre was not open 24 hours a day.

I hope that the Minister understands how passionate we are about the matter. My constituency is 17 minutes from London and it shares a boundary with yours, Mr Speaker. People in the top part of my constituency all go to Luton and Dunstable—quite rightly so; it is an excellent facility—and those in the bottom part of my constituency, or anyone who comes off the M1 and the M25, end up going to Watford for their acute care.

I want Watford General Hospital to succeed. I think the location of the site is completely ludicrous, and we need a new general hospital for the growing population in our part of the world. I know that you have pressures on housing, Mr Speaker, as we have. But I want the houses, because I want people to have somewhere to live—so many families are struggling at the moment—and if we are to build those houses, we need facilities, such as schools and everything else. When my constituents go to bed at night, they need to know that the urgent care centre is open in case something happens; and that if they cannot cope, we can blue-light them to Watford or to Luton and Dunstable.

I have tried for weeks and weeks to get this Adjournment debate. My hon. Friend the Member is lucky, because I had been asking for a 60-minute debate in Westminster Hall. We may yet end up there, but that will depend a lot on what he says from the Dispatch Box.

7.12 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): I will do my best to address the issues raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) in order to pre-empt the further debate to which he alludes. I congratulate him on securing this debate. I commend him for his continuing and passionate campaign on behalf of his constituents, and for his expertise on health issues, which he has brought once again to the House.

I reiterate the fundamental principle for all service change in the NHS: it should be based on clear evidence that it will deliver better outcomes for patients. That is the framework that is applied. I understand that my right hon. Friend is concerned about the changes proposed in his constituency. He will appreciate, not least as a former Minister, that I cannot say anything that would prejudice the outcome of the ongoing consultation, but he has spoken powerfully about his concerns in the House tonight.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend agrees that any decision should be driven by what is best for the constituency clinically, by what is best for the health service in the area, and by what is of most benefit to the greatest number of people in the area. I shall briefly set out some of the background, as I understand it, to the issues that inform the consultation. As he mentioned, in December 2016, the urgent care centre was temporarily closed overnight because of concerns about patient safety as a result of problems with staffing the GP overnight shifts. The CCG’s advice was that the urgent need to address patient safety issues did not allow time for consultation about that temporary change. I appreciate the concern that he raised about the manner in which that decision was taken.

The local NHS has worked hard to manage the consequences of the decision. I understand from the CCG that the volume of overnight patients at the centre was relatively low, and that the impact that has been felt at Watford General Hospital, notwithstanding the other challenges it faces, has been of the order of one or two patients per night, usually those with relatively minor injuries. As my right hon. Friend will be aware, emergency cases have been sent to Watford since the closure of
Hemel Hempstead Urgent Care Centre 13 MARCH 2018

[Stephen Barclay]

Hemel Hempstead’s A&E in 2009—he referred to the protest involving a coffin about that decision, which was taken under the previous Labour Government. On provision in the early hours of the morning, he will also be aware that journey times then will be shorter than they would be at the times when the urgent care centres are open.

Sir Mike Penning: Let me go back a fraction. If the decision has to be based on clinical advice—I understand the principle—what is the point of consulting the public, who are not clinically trained? We have to consult them, because that is what the law says, so is the law wrong for saying we should consult people who are not clinically trained? If the decision has already been made, what is the point?

Stephen Barclay: The public consultation is to inform the discussion with clinicians. If such a decision were taken by Ministers—my right hon. Friend alluded to this in his remarks—it would likewise be informed by public consultation. That is part of running a transparent and open process.

The CCG is now consulting the public on future opening hours, following a broader urgent care strategy review. The consultation seeks views on three options: retaining the current temporary hours; increasing the temporary hours by two hours at the end of the day; or re-opening on a 24-hour basis. As it runs until 28 March, I know that my right hon. Friend and his constituents will wish to share their views as part of the process.

I do understand the criticism made by my right hon. Friend’s constituents that the overnight closure has been dragging on for too long and that a final decision needs to be made as soon as possible. The views gathered during the current consultation will inform the CCG’s decisions about the future opening hours for Hemel Hempstead UTC, as well as about the contract for West Herts medical centre. I further understand that the CCG has commissioned an independent research company to review and analyse all the comments received, and the feedback will be compiled into a summary report. That will be presented to the Herts Valleys CCG board meeting, in public, on 26 April, when a decision on both issues will be made.

Turning to the issue of the treatment centre’s status, on 1 December 2017, Hemel Hempstead UCC changed to a UTC, as part of national measures introduced by NHS England. I understand from the CCG that this was a change of name, not of service. The CCG therefore did not carry out a further consultation on the establishment of the UTC as it did not feel that that represented a significant change in service. I understand that no services have been withdrawn from the UTC, but there have been a number of enhancements, including: the introduction of a number of bookable appointments through NHS 111; the addition of near patient testing for some conditions, reducing waiting times and reducing the need for patients to attend Watford General Hospital for some tests; and an improved IT system, meaning that medical staff will be able to access patients’ records if they give consent. The CCG also expects services to expand to include other professionals, such as pharmacists, emergency care practitioners, those providing access to mental health services and community nursing staff.

The distinction that was being drawn was in respect of services that have been removed, on which my right hon. Friend is right that there is a legal requirement for a consultation. He has expressed to the House his concerns about the process by which that temporary decision on patient safety was taken. The point I was making was that the services that have been brought to the area are bringing a benefit to the local community. I would have thought that they would be welcomed. Indeed, from April, many patients with diabetes in the area will no longer need to travel to Watford to be seen by a consultant, because the consultants will be coming to them by working in the community. Again, that is good for patients and for the system as a whole.

Stephen Barclay: The Minister has just told the House that there has been a complete change in how physiotherapy is provided—it was provided at the hospital and is now provided elsewhere. There was no consultation on that, although I understand that there was a requirement to do so, because this involved a complete change of service in respect of where people go and so on. The point I am trying to make is: when there is no consultation, what do we do? Do we just sit back and say, “Okay”? Some kind of measure has to be taken when consultation continually gets ignored or does not happen at all.

Stephen Barclay: The distinction that was being drawn was in respect of services that have been removed, on which my right hon. Friend is right that there is a legal requirement for a consultation. He has expressed to the House his concerns about the process by which that temporary decision on patient safety was taken. The point I was making was that the services that have been brought to the area are bringing a benefit to the local community. I would have thought that they would be welcomed. Indeed, from April, many patients with diabetes in the area will no longer need to travel to Watford to be seen by a consultant, because the consultants will be coming to them by working in the community. Again, that is good for patients and for the system as a whole. It is part of the way in which these systems evolve: some services come closer to the community, while others, as under the decision taken by the Labour Government in 2009, are rationalised into Watford A&E.

I understand my right hon. Friend’s frustration that in his view the local CCG seems out of touch with popular opinion. Given the way in which he champions the community that he represents, I know that he is not out of touch with popular opinion—he always speaks in a well-informed way about his constituents’ needs, and I would expect that to be represented in the consultation responses that the CCG receives. The CCG is accountable to NHS England for fulfilling its functions. It is also a member of the health and wellbeing board, at which local authorities and other partners can challenge how it has been fulfilling its functions. The CCG’s activities are subject to scrutiny by local authorities and to supervision by NHS England. If NHS England believes that the CCG is failing to discharge its functions, it has the power to intervene and issue directions, or to replace the accountable officer.

It is worth reiterating that all proposed service changes should meet the four tests for service change. They should have support from GP commissioners; be based on clinical evidence; demonstrate public and patient engagement; and consider patient choice. It is right that such matters are addressed locally, where local healthcare needs are best understood, rather than in Whitehall. I think my right hon. Friend recognised the point about Ministers not making clinical-led decisions. For those reasons, I am sure that he will appreciate that I am not
able to offer the House an opinion on the merits of the proposals, but of course we recognise that changes to health services inspire passionate debate, as they should, from all quarters, as we have seen this evening.

There is no standard approach on what an urgent care centre should offer. The offer varies between different urgent care centres, depending on the services required locally. Urgent care centres can treat a range of injuries, including sprains, strains and broken bones.

Sir Mike Penning: I want to help the Minister. The urgent care centre is gone. We do not have an urgent care centre; it is now an urgent treatment centre. This is something that confuses my constituents as well. I was trying to make two points. First, it is not just about the clinical commissioning group on its own. The decision to close over Christmas in 2016 was made by West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust, and it cannot escape blame, because it was the trust’s chief executive who made that decision and went on and acted. Secondly, it is also about the lack of knowledge and understanding of the community. We have had a churn of people coming through and running the services. They seem to come and go and come and go, never understanding or empathising with the constituency.

Stephen Barclay: Before my right hon. Friend’s intervention, I was just coming to the urgent treatment centre, because there is obviously a distinction. Urgent treatment centres are about standardising the range of options and simplifying the system so that patients know where to go and have clarity about which services are on offer. My right hon. Friend made the point about how we direct footfall and constituents into services at the right point to reduce the demand on the A&E at Watford by simplifying what the UTC does, what it offers and how that is understood by constituents.

Patients and the public will be able to access urgent treatment centres that are open for 12 hours a day, and that are GP-led and staffed by a range of clinicians with access to simple diagnostics. They will have a consistent route to access urgent appointments offered within four hours and booked through NHS 111, ambulance services and general practice. A walk-in access option will also be retained. They will increasingly be able to access routine and same-day appointments, and out-of-hours general practice for both urgent and routine appointments at the same facility where geographically appropriate. UTCs are also part of a locally integrated urgent and emergency care service working in conjunction with the ambulance service, NHS 111, local GPs, hospital A&E services and other local providers.

In conclusion, these are important issues, and decisions should not be taken lightly. The location of services is a difficult and often controversial issue, and my right hon. Friend is to be commended for his campaign and the points that he has made on behalf of his constituents.

Sir Mike Penning: It is not often that we get more time to speak in this place, so while I have the Minister at the Dispatch Box, can he answer this very simple question: what recourse is there for me, as the MP, for my constituents when we are misled—I know that I have privilege, but I am using the word “misled”—by a senior NHS management team about what is going to happen to the urgent care service? I am talking about when what the team says turns out to be completely untrue. What recourse is there so that we can start to rebuild some trust in my constituency?

Stephen Barclay: As my right hon. Friend knows, it would be inappropriate for a Minister to comment on a specific allegation such as that from the Dispatch Box. I cannot comment on this specific consultation, which is under way as we speak. The point that has come out of this debate is that the decision of December 2016 was taken on patient safety grounds, owing to a difficulty in recruiting GPs at that time. A consultation is now under way, and it is for my right hon. Friend’s constituents to make their case as part of that consultation.

The people affected by these changes need to be involved in the decision; that is what the consultation will seek to achieve. Our starting point for discussing service change is that there will be no changes to the services that people currently receive without proper public consultation. I therefore urge my right hon. Friend and his constituents to make their voices heard as part of that consultation in the usual way.

Question put and agreed to.

7.27 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 14 March 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Severn Growth Summit

1. Michelle Donelan (Chippingham) (Con): What steps he is taking to expand the economic links between south Wales and the south-west of England as a result of the Severn Growth Summit.

2. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the proposal for a Welsh EU continuity Bill.

3. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the proposal for a Welsh EU continuity Bill.

Stuart Andrew: I would say that Wales is a good place for my hon. Friend’s constituents to come and visit as a tourist destination, too. Of course we want to make sure that transport is as effective as possible, and we are in constant discussions about improving services. I will make sure we make that point about the food.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): One way that we could have real economic growth and jobs prospects for the whole region would be to deliver the tidal lagoon project. It has been more than 18 months since the Hendry review. Can I ask the Minister to get on with it and encourage the Secretary of State to start defending and standing up for Wales in the Cabinet?

Stuart Andrew: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State always stands up for Wales in Cabinet and does so very effectively. We are looking at the tidal lagoon carefully to ensure that it is value for money for the taxpayer, too.

Welsh EU Continuity Bill

2. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the proposal for a Welsh EU continuity Bill.

3. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the proposal for a Welsh EU continuity Bill.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): As I have said previously, I do not think that the Welsh Government’s continuity Bill is necessary. The UK Government want to reach agreement with the Welsh Government on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, with a view to securing the National Assembly’s support for the legislation.

Alan Brown: Despite that answer, the reality is that on Friday, the Cabinet Office printed a list of 24 devolved competencies that the UK Government are going to snatch back from Wales and Scotland. That proves the need for a continuity Bill. Why is the Secretary of State not defending his devolved Parliament and standing up for it, instead of allowing this power grab?

Alun Cairns: My relationship with the First Minister and the Welsh Government is a positive one. We do not agree on everything, but we agree on the objective, which is to improve the outcomes for businesses and communities in Wales. There are 64 areas of the devolution settlement with Wales. There are 24 areas that we want to discuss further with the Welsh Government, to come to an agreement on how best to ensure that common rules apply across the UK, so that Welsh businesses are protected and can market their products across the rest of the UK.

Tommy Sheppard: Earlier this week, the long-awaited Government amendments to clause 11 of the EU (Withdrawal) Bill were published. Despite assurances
and promises, they were published without the consent, support or agreement of the devolved Administrations. Is it still the Government’s policy to obtain the consent of the devolved Administrations? If further agreement is reached, will the Secretary of State bring forward further amendments?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman is referring to amendments tabled to clause 11 in the other place. Commitments were made that amendments would be tabled, and that is exactly what we have done. If we had not tabled those amendments, we would have been criticised. As I have said in this Chamber and elsewhere, we are determined to work with the devolved Administrations to come to an agreement, but it is the UK Government that have the interest of looking after the whole UK. It is the UK Government that want to act in the interests of businesses and communities to ensure that a Scottish business can sell or buy products in Wales under the same regulations, where a common market matters.

David Linden: One of the reasons why continuity Bills have been brought forward is that there is no agreement in the Joint Ministerial Committee on this blatant Westminster power grab, but that has not stopped the UK Government pressing ahead anyway. Does the Secretary of State agree that no deal can be agreed on new powers unless there is agreement at the JMC?

Alun Cairns: I am hoping the agreement of the devolved Administrations will come as soon as possible. I am not going to tie it down to any one particular Joint Ministerial Committee meeting, but the one last week was another positive engagement between Administrations. I have been in this position before, when it was predicted that I would not get a legislative consent motion for the Wales Bill as it was progressing through Parliament. This can be done only by constant hard work and engagement, as well as optimism on both sides—acting in the interests of businesses and communities, not in the interests of politicians.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that not only is there not a power grab, but there will be a significant increase in powers to the devolved Administrations as Britain leaves the European Union?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is no intention of any power grab. Of the 64 areas that relate to Wales, we have already said that 30 will pass to the devolved Administration without the need for any further agreement, or at the very most only an informal agreement between the UK Government and them, but there are 24 areas in which it is in the interests of businesses in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as in England, to have common practices so that we can protect the UK market; 80% of Welsh output is sold to the rest of the UK.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Does the Secretary of State recall that Wales as a principality and the United Kingdom as a nation voted to leave the European Union and that, rather than talking about EU continuity, we should therefore be focusing on how to strike the best deal for Britain on leaving the EU, particularly to be ready and prepared on day one at the Dover frontline?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman rightly points out that Wales voted to leave the European Union, and we have an obligation to act on that instruction from the referendum. This is also an opportunity to highlight that 80% of output from Wales goes to the rest of the UK, and Scotland sells four times more to the rest of the UK than it sells to the rest of the European Union. On that basis, protecting the UK market must be a priority, and acting in the interests of businesses and communities is our priority.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the advantages to Wales of having a common market across the whole United Kingdom?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Much focus is understandably and rightly placed on selling and trading with the European Union, but the most important market to Wales is the UK market—with eight out of 10 lorries of output from Wales and complex supply chains—and this is only right. Only two weeks ago, we recognised that the investment of Toyota in Derbyshire will have major positive impacts on the Toyota plant making engines on Deeside.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I am disappointed that the much-promised UK Government amendment to the power grab in clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, tabled by the right hon. Gentleman’s Government in the House of Lords on Monday, states that UK Ministers will merely consult Welsh Government Ministers, not seek their consent. In so doing, his Government have changed the fundamental principle of the devolution settlement against the settled will of the people of Wales.

Alun Cairns: I do not recognise the statements made by the hon. Lady. The amendment tabled in the other place is a significant one. It recognises that powers automatically fall to the devolved Administrations, but also introduces the prospect of bringing them in centrally to protect the UK common market, which is in the interests of Welsh business. I have had the privilege of sitting in front of a number of expert panels of industry representatives, and we are acting in the way they are calling for, rather than in the way that some politicians who are more interested in the powers are calling for.

Christina Rees: I thank the Secretary of State for his response, but the UK Government have said that the amendment merely creates a temporary place for the 24 powers to be kept—in a freezer—until new arrangements are discussed. If this is a temporary measure, why permanently alter the Government of Wales Act 2006?

Alun Cairns: Protecting the UK market is absolutely a priority for us. The hon. Lady will have food producers in her constituency who want to sell their products in England according to common practices on food labelling. That is an example of the area of policy on which we are seeking to get agreement. We will continue to work hard with the devolved Administrations to get agreement,
but only the UK Government can act in the interests of the whole UK, not some politicians in other areas who are seeking to represent a regional dimension only.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Last week, the Secretary of State published a list explicitly outlining which powers Westminster intends either to hoard or to dole out, as it sees fit. This week, he published a set of amendments to clause 11 of the withdrawal Bill, without gaining the agreement of either of the devolved nations. Will he explain how that is anything other than a power grab?

Alun Cairns: In the first instance, that list is still subject to discussion, as clearly stated in the headings under the three various sections. I am also pleased to say that the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales recognised that we wanted to publish that list and supported our publication of it, while not necessarily recognising the three elements of it. That demonstrates the positive way in which we seek to work with the devolved Administrations to get agreement. It is only the UK Government who can act in the interests of the whole UK.

Liz Saville Roberts: Today the Welsh EU continuity Bill will be subject to the first stage of the expedited legislative timetable. If it passes, debates over the power grab will be forced out of this Chamber and into the courts. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether he intends to fight us in the courts?

Alun Cairns: As I said in my initial answer, I do not think that the continuity Bill is necessary. The Welsh Government have also said that they would prefer not to pursue it. I genuinely believe that there is enough good will between all Administrations to come to an agreement. After all, if we focus on the needs of businesses and communities, we will achieve a positive outcome. It is when politicians focus on the powers rather than on outcomes that things go wrong.

Rail Electrification: Swansea

3. Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on the effect on the Welsh economy of the decision not to electrify the mainline to Swansea.

[904276]

5. Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on the effect on the Welsh economy of the decision not to electrify the mainline to Swansea.

[904278]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): The UK Government's record investment in Wales's rail infrastructure is focused on maximising the benefits to passengers while delivering the best value for taxpayers. The £5.7 billion fleet of modern, intercity express programme trains running on the great western main line to Swansea brings significant time savings to and from London and tangible benefits to passengers in terms of speed, comfort and reliability, without the need for a costly, disruptive programme of electrification.

Darren Jones: The failure to fully electrify the line to Swansea means that more people will use their cars. Following the removal of the tolls on the Severn bridge, the Department for Transport said in response to my written parliamentary question: “No further modelling was undertaken” on the increase in cars. Has the Minister’s Department assessed the potential further gridlock in north Bristol?

Stuart Andrew: I simply do not accept that not electrifying the line to Swansea will not bring benefits—it will. The train journey times to London from those areas will be reduced by 15 minutes. We have to recognise that the costs have gone up significantly. The benefit-to-cost ratio was extremely low and even the Public Accounts Committee recommended looking at the issue again.

Emma Hardy: Does the Secretary of State agree that his Government’s broken promises on rail electrification, both in Wales and the wider UK, including Hull, and their unwillingness to provide funding for rail enhancements will damage connectivity and therefore hinder our opportunities for economic growth and development?

Stuart Andrew: I find it very hard to accept a Labour Member talking about rail investment when that party electrified probably only 10 miles of line in 13 years. We are bringing record investment all over the country, particularly in Wales, and we are proud of our achievements.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware of press reports suggesting that the Welsh Labour Government are now cancelling electrification projects in the valleys? Does he agree that if they were serious about improving transport links, they would get on with building the M4 relief road?

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is this Government who have been bringing in the investment in our rail infrastructure, and the M4 corridor really does need solving. Many people and businesses across south Wales have been calling for that for a very long time and, frankly, it is time that the Welsh Government got on with it.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): May I urge my hon. Friend to look at the evidence received by the Select Committee on Transport? We heard that the new bi-mode class 800 trains will run to the same timetable, whether they operate on diesel power or on electric, so there will be no loss of service by not having the lines electrified.

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend is a great expert in transport matters and he is absolutely right that having those lines above the train will not improve performance. What passengers want is to be able to get to their destination reliably, and that is what we are going to bring back.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Diolch. As we heard from the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), the Labour Government yesterday cancelled the electrification of the line to Ebbw Vale using exactly the same arguments as the Secretary of State for cancelling the electrification of
the main line to Swansea—I do not know whether they swapped press releases or not. Is it not the case that when it comes to the Welsh railways, the Welsh people have been let down by the Governments at both ends of the M4?

Stuart Andrew: I would not accept that. The fact is that we are investing in the railway. Let us not forget that some of the investment in England will benefit passengers in north Wales. For example, the Halton curve helps passengers from north Wales to get to Liverpool and the north-west of England.

Steel Industry

4. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the future role of the Welsh steel industry in the UK steel supply chain.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): We are working with the sector, the unions and devolved Administrations to support the UK steel industry to develop a long-term viable solution. We are deeply disappointed by the US announcement and are taking all possible action to support the industry.

Tom Pursglove: The steelworks in Corby is part of a comprehensive steel supply chain that involves sites in Wales. Further to the conversations the Secretary of State has been having in Wales, what discussions is he having with UK Government Ministers about how we can best support the UK steel industry as a whole?

Alun Cairns: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he is doing to support the steel industry. He was at the forefront of the debate two years ago when the steel industry was facing a particular crisis, and it is through his influence, with others, that we have introduced an energy compensation scheme, flexibility over EU emissions targets and 45 trade defence measures to prevent illegal steel dumping in Europe. His influence is pretty strong in this debate.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware that when President Bush introduced steel tariffs in 2002, it led to 200,000 job losses in the US? What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that American politicians, employers and trade unions are pressing President Trump to drop these utterly self-defeating tariffs?

Alun Cairns: We have said that we disagree with the statements the President has made. I was in the US just two weeks ago, and I spoke to our ambassador and the UK’s trade commissioner about this issue. I subsequently met the US ambassador here in the UK and I spoke again, just last Friday, to the UK trade commissioner in the US. This is a cross-Government effort. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade is travelling to the US as we speak to pursue and raise these issues. There has been a whole cross-Government approach to this issue and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has raised it directly with the President.

European Union (Withdrawal) Bill

6. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the UK leaving the EU and the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I have regular and constructive discussions with the Welsh Government on EU exit and the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. I look forward to continuing those discussions this afternoon at the meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee in plenary, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Does the Secretary of State agree that agriculture, and hill farming in particular, is vital to the Welsh economy? What is he doing to ensure that the EU money currently going into the rural economy continues to do so after Brexit? What discussions has he had on that with his colleague from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend is a great supporter of agriculture across the whole UK and he is right to highlight the importance of the agricultural sector to the Welsh economy. He will also be familiar with our manifesto commitment, as well as statements made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, to fund agriculture on a similar scale up to 2022.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The US-UK trade and investment working group was set up in July last year. What representations has the Secretary of State made to that group about the impact President Trump’s tariffs would have on the Welsh steel industry?

Alun Cairns: I mentioned to the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) the direct actions I have taken and the whole host of actions being taken by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade. This is such a priority for this Government that there is cross-Government action to support the steel industry. As someone whose father was a welder in the steelworks in Port Talbot, I recognise the importance of this industry to Wales.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, the Welsh Labour Government in Cardiff love nothing more than a long and fuzzy row with Westminster over powers. Does he agree that they would do much better to work constructively and pragmatically with Ministers here to make a success of Brexit, which is, after all, what the people of Wales voted for?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. As my predecessor, he took positive steps to get to a positive relationship with the Welsh Government and laid the foundations of the Wales Bill, which is now the Wales Act 2017. That has clarified the devolution settlement and enabled constructive debate to take place. I am optimistic that on the EU (Withdrawal) Bill we can win if we both focus on the outcomes we need to focus on: the interests of our businesses and communities.
Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I met representatives of Celsa Steel from my constituency yesterday, who made very clear to me the importance of pan-European safeguards to prevent diversionary dumping as a result of the Trump tariffs. Does the Secretary of State not think it ironic that, at a time when we need to be co-operating more than ever across Europe, we are planning to leave the European Union?

Alun Cairns: I also want to support Celsa Steel, but I remind the hon. Gentleman that Wales voted to leave the European Union, and we have an obligation to act on that instruction. However, he is right about the diversion and the distortion to the market from the risks of the action that is taking place. We are working closely with the European Union to protect the interests of Welsh steelworkers.

**Industrial Strategy: Cross-Border Working**

8. Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that the growth corridors set out in the industrial strategy facilitate cross-border working. [904281]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Stuart Andrew): Members across this House recognise that economic activity is not constrained by administrative borders. A perfect demonstration of that is the closeness of the economies of north-east Wales and the north-west of England, supported by the northern powerhouse and the Mersey Dee Alliance. I was delighted to see that growth corridors were formally recognised in the industrial strategy and we will continue to develop these for the benefit of the 50% of the Welsh people who live within 25 miles of the border.

Mr Jayawardena: Wales has great access to my constituency thanks to the M4, but has my hon. Friend considered improving connectivity to the south of England by building the M31, for example, which would link the M3 to the M4, and possibly beyond, with the economic benefits that that would bring for everyone?

Stuart Andrew: I completely agree: we recognise that connectivity—particularly cross-border connectivity—is incredibly important. The Department for Transport is gathering evidence at the moment to inform the second road investment strategy, and I hope that my hon. Friend will put a bid forward.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Bristol has been very successful in attracting financial services to its economy. Now that the tolls on the toll bridge are going on the bridge will make it easier for residents in north-west England and nearly 700,000 in north Wales. Priming and connecting the two economies makes absolute sense. The issue is funding—money. Welsh Governments have already committed hundreds of millions of pounds to these improvements. What new additional funding have this Government committed to date?

Stuart Andrew: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have given more moneys to the Welsh Assembly under the new settlement, but I completely recognise that the cross-border activity in north Wales and the north-west of England is incredibly important. That is why I was pleased to meet representatives from the all-party group the other day. We are looking at some of the rail investment that is needed, particularly the Halton curve and the Wrexham-Bidston line.

**Investment in the Railway Network**

9. Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on future investment in the railway network in Wales. [904282]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I hold regular meetings and discussions with the Transport Secretary and his ministerial team to make the case for investment in Wales’s railway infrastructure. I am determined to drive forward improvements to Wales’s rail connectivity for the benefit of our passengers, commuters and businesses.

Geraint Davies: I am losing my voice, Mr Speaker. HS2 will cost £56 billion and 20,000 Welsh jobs. For £1 billion, we could build two and a half miles of HS2 or halve the time between Cardiff and Swansea and have an electrified Swansea metro. Why is the Welsh Secretary not objecting to the £1 billion cut from Network Rail to our rail infrastructure and investing in Wales instead?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has done very well, considering he has lost his voice.

Alun Cairns: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that HS2 is a UK scheme and provides an opportunity for significant connectivity benefits with north Wales. He refers to the Swansea metro project, which offers interesting opportunities, and I am happy to say that I am meeting Mark Barry, the project’s architect, in the coming weeks.
Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the recently launched West and Wales strategic rail prospectus contains sensible proposals that would, if adopted, significantly improve rail connectivity in north Wales and that they should receive favourable consideration by the Government?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his hard work in this area, because cross-border connectivity is extremely important. It demonstrates how integrated the network is. There are significant investments already taking place across the north Wales network, including improvements to signalling, as well as the Halton curve, which has already been referred to. Any additions to the debate, however, are interesting, and we will look at them in due course.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904359] Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 14 March.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I will be making a statement following Prime Minister’s questions updating the House on the Salisbury incident.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Vicky Foxcroft: I thank the Prime Minister for agreeing to meet me to discuss the work of the cross-party Youth Violence Commission. Youth violence is complex and needs long-term solutions, but some things can be done right now, such as legislating to ensure that all knives and sharp instruments in shops are locked away or stored behind counters to ensure that no one can steal and use them. Will she do this?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has raised a very important issue. As she says, this is a complex problem, and we need to ensure we have long-term solutions. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will shortly be publishing a new serious violence strategy, which will put an emphasis on early intervention with young people. It is important that we have tough legislation on knives, but we also need to work in partnership with retailers. We have recently consulted on new measures, including restrictions on knives sold online, and in March 2016, when I was Home Secretary, we reached a voluntary agreement with major retailers about how knives should be displayed and the training given to sales staff to support action to tackle knife crime. She is right, however, to raise this as an area of concern.

Q4. [904362] Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): On the subject of Northern Ireland, does the Prime Minister stand by the commitments made in the joint report of December, and will she confirm that we will accept nothing that will undermine the integrity of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that we stand by all the commitments we made in December. We have been clear that our preferred option is to deliver on them through our new partnership with the EU, with specific solutions to address the unique circumstances in Northern Ireland if needed. The work we are undertaking with the Commission will include that on the final so-called backstop, which will form part of the withdrawal agreement. That cannot be the text that the Commission has proposed, which, as I have said, is unacceptable, but we stand ready to work with the Commission and the Irish Government to ensure that all the commitments on Northern Ireland made in the joint report are included in the withdrawal agreement.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I, along with the Prime Minister, absolutely condemn the vile messages and threatening packages sent to Muslim Members of the House and also the rise in Islamophobia and the abusive messages being sent to Muslim families all over this country. It has to be utterly condemned by all of us, just as we would condemn anybody who attempted to divide our country by racism or extremism of any form. We have to stand united with any community that is under threat at any time.

I am sure the whole House will join me in supporting what the Prime Minister just said about Stephen Hawking, one of the most acclaimed scientists of his generation, who helped us to understand the world and the universe. He was concerned about peace and the survival of the world, but he was also a passionate campaigner for the national health service. He said:

“I have received excellent medical attention in Britain... I believe in universal health care. And I am not afraid to say so.”

If we believe in universal healthcare, how can it be possible for someone to live and work in this country and pay their taxes, and then be denied access to the NHS for lifesaving cancer treatment? Can the Prime Minister explain?

The Prime Minister: Let me first join the right hon. Gentleman in saying that there is absolutely no place in our society for hate crime or racism, whatever form it takes. We should stand united against such behaviour and such activities.

I am pleased that we have a good record on cancer provision. More people are surviving cancer in this country than ever before as a result of changes that have...
been made and developments in the national health service. Of course we continue to work to ensure that the treatments that we make available are the best that we can provide. I am not aware of the particular case that the right hon. Gentleman has raised with me, but we want to ensure that all who are entitled to treatment through the national health service are able to receive it. There are, of course, questions about particular drugs that are made available to individuals for treatment, which we continue to look at.

Jeremy Corbyn: I will indeed be writing to the Prime Minister about the case of Georgina, with which I am concerned. It relates to a man who has lived in this country for 44 years, has worked and paid his taxes—obviously, he is an older gentleman—and is now being denied cancer treatment. I suspect he is not alone in that, and I urge the Prime Minister to discuss the matter with the Home Office and others.

This week, I received a letter from Hilary, a British pensioner—it is relevant to the point that the Prime Minister just made— who wrote:

“I am now having to pay for my thyroid medication because the CCG needs to save money. I have worked all my life, paid national insurance and... this is not fair”.

Last March, the Health Secretary said that “it is absolutely essential that we... get back to the 95% target” for accident and emergency waiting times and that that should happen in “the course of the next calendar year”.

Well, the calendar year is now up. Can the Prime Minister explain why that is no longer possible?

The Prime Minister: I look forward to receiving the details of the individual case from the right hon. Gentleman. Gentleman, but let me take this opportunity to remind him that I think he raised a case about Georgina with me last October and has not written to me about that.

Jeremy Corbyn: My understanding is that Georgina’s case was resolved before the Prime Minister was required to do anything about it—following my raising it here.

The Prime Minister: If nothing else, Mr Speaker, that proves who knows best about the NHS?

Mr Speaker: Order. There are lots of questions to get through, and they must be heard.

Jeremy Corbyn: A recent National Audit Office report states that NHS funding will fall by 0.3% in 2019. People’s lives are at stake. Is the Prime Minister really saying that the A&E doctors are wrong, that the NHS managers are wrong and that the royal colleges and the health unions are wrong, and that it is actually only she who knows best about the NHS?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about scaremongering in Wales, but I was pointing out the facts about what is happening in the NHS in Wales. That is why we often see people in Wales trying to get treatment in England rather than in Wales. We are putting more money into the national health service, but in order to do that, we need to ensure that we have a strong economy to provide the money for the NHS. What do we know about Labour’s policies? They would cause a run on the pound, crash our economy and bankrupt Britain, so there would be less money for the NHS.

Jeremy Corbyn: When people are dying because of overcrowding and long waits in our hospitals, the Prime Minister should get a grip on it and ensure that the NHS now has the money that it needs to deal with patient demand. In a recent interview, the Health Secretary said of NHS staff that “when they signed up to go into medicine, they knew there would be pressurised moments.”
What they also expected was a recognition of that, with an annual pay rise without cuts in their paid leave, and proper funding for the national health service. When there are 100,000 unfilled posts, there are clearly not enough staff around them to share the burden. We started with Professor Stephen Hawking. Just a few months ago, he said:

“There is overwhelming evidence that NHS funding and the number of doctors and nurses are inadequate, and it is getting worse”.

Does the Prime Minister agree with Professor Hawking?

The Prime Minister: Once again, I am very happy to point out some facts to the right hon. Gentleman. We have 14,900 more doctors working in the national health service. We have almost 13,900 more nurses working on our wards. Why did we put an emphasis on nurses working on our wards? It was because of what we saw under the Labour Government in Mid Staffordshire. What we need to do to ensure that we can provide the funding for the NHS—we are providing record levels of funding for the NHS—is to take a balanced approach to our economy. That is an approach that deals with our debts, keeps taxes low on working families and puts more money into our public services, such as hospitals and schools. Labour’s approach would increase the debt, and that would mean less money for our schools and hospitals and higher taxes for ordinary working people, because what we know about the Labour party is that it is always ordinary people who pay the price of Labour.

Q. [904367] Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Last week’s launch of a consultation on all aspects of domestic violence will be widely welcomed in Gloucester and across the country. Will the Prime Minister, who has done so much on such issues, confirm today that the Government intend to increase spending, bed provision and, where necessary, the number of women’s refuges, so that those who have survived get the help and safe haven that they deserve?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue. It is one that I have obviously given considerable attention to, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary continues to follow that work. We are entirely committed to developing a sustainable funding model for refuges, and I can guarantee that funding for refuges will continue at the same level as today, because I know how critical the support is to vulnerable people at a time of crisis. We will ring-fence the funding for short-term supported housing overall, including for refuges, for the long term indefinitely. That means that no refuge should worry about closing or have any doubts about our commitment to ensuring that we provide a sustainable funding model for them.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Labour party about hate crime and Islamophobia, and my thoughts are with the family and friends of Dr Stephen Hawking.

For months, the devolved Administrations have been waiting for the UK Government to table amendments to clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. On Monday, the long-awaited amendments were published but without the agreement of the devolved Governments. Will the Prime Minister tell the House why the amendments have been forced on the devolved Administrations?

The Prime Minister: In one sentence the right hon. Gentleman says that he is waiting for the amendment—the reason why we took time is that we were talking with the Scottish and Welsh Governments—and then when we do publish it he complains that we have published it. He really needs to get his story straight.

Ian Blackford: I encourage the Prime Minister to listen to the question, because it was about agreement. I am afraid that that answer simply was not good enough.

The Prime Minister famously claimed that the UK was made up of “equal partners”. What an irony that is given that she is overseeing the demolition of the devolution settlement. In 1997, the Tories were happy to oppose the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament, and the clothes have not changed. In 2018, they are happy to systematically destroy the settlement that the Parliament thrives on. I call upon the Prime Minister once again: stop this attack on devolution and redouble your efforts in working with the devolved Administrations to find agreement.

The Prime Minister: This Government have actually given more powers to the Scottish Government and will be giving more powers to the Scottish Government. Significant extra powers will be devolved to the Scottish and Welsh Governments as a result of the decisions that we are taking around Brexit. We have given more powers, including the tax-raising powers, but it is just a pity that the Scottish Nationalists have chosen to use those powers to increase taxes on people earning £26,000 or more.

Q. [904368] Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Last week, Horsham held an apprenticeship fair, building on the success that has seen a 70% reduction in youth unemployment since 2010. Nationally, we see increasing exports, increasing productivity and increasing real wages. Will my right hon. Friend again remind the House that it is that sustained economic performance that underpins our investment in our valued public services?

The Prime Minister: I commend Horsham for holding an apprenticeship fair; it is important that we give young people the opportunity of an apprenticeship. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we can fund public services only if we have strength in our economy providing the income for us to do so. In the past few weeks, we have seen that manufacturing output has grown for nine consecutive months for the first time since records began in 1968. We have seen the best two quarters of productivity growth since the financial crisis and the lowest year-to-date net borrowing since 2008, and employment is near a record high. The Conservatives are delivering a strong economy, new jobs, healthier finances and an economy that really is fit for the future.

Q. [904360] Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Last week, GKN workers came to Parliament—typically 25 and 30 years’ service, their mums and dads before them working for a British engineering icon that is 259 years old. Sat opposite were the three fabulously
wealthy owners of Melrose, determined to stage a hostile takeover of the company, break it up and sell it off.

I ask the Prime Minister this. She told Parliament that she would act in the national interest; the next 10 days will decide the future. Will she use the powers that she has to intervene and block this hostile takeover in the British national interest?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Business Secretary has been speaking to both companies on an impartial basis. We will always act in the UK’s national interest; actually, it is under this Government that we have seen the changes introduced to the takeover code to provide greater transparency and give target firms more time to respond. There is a narrow range of scenarios where Ministers can intervene on mergers on public interest grounds, but we will always ensure that we act in the national interest.

Q10. [904369] Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Some 3,157 medical students are going into general practice this year, which is excellent news, but we are still losing too many experienced GPs in their mid-50s due to the tax penalties on their old pension scheme. Would the Government look at a targeted, time-limited exemption on this dedicated group of clinicians, who do so much for the health of us all?

The Prime Minister: That is an important point. As my hon. Friend will know, experienced senior hospital doctors and GPs who become members of the national health service pension scheme benefit from one of the best available defined-benefit occupational pension schemes. We provide generous tax reliefs to allow everyone to build up a pension pot worth just over £1 million tax-free. The issue that my hon. Friend is raising is that although GPs are not penalised if they work after age 55, many may have exhausted the generous allowance for tax relief available by that time. I can say to my hon. Friend that the Chancellor of the Exchequer was, of course, listening to the question that he raised.

Q3. [904361] Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): This year, 13 April represents the 99th anniversary of what happened at the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, India, known as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, in which more than 1,000 peaceful protesters were murdered by soldiers under the command of General Dyer. Will the Prime Minister join me in commemorating the massacre and meet me and others who are campaigning for this shameful episode to be remembered across the UK?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very specific issue and a very specific point. I will be happy to look at the question he has raised and respond to him in writing.

Q12. [904371] Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): In my constituency, Farnborough, in the borough of Rushmoor, is the birthplace of British aviation and is now home to a thriving range of aviation, aerospace and defence businesses—including Airbus, with its Zephyr. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister join me in extending our best wishes to the Zephyr team as they look forward to making a world-record-breaking attempt for high altitude unmanned aviation?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in wishing all the very best to the Zephyr team in the attempt that they are making. He is right that his constituency plays a crucial role in the aerospace industry. I am pleased to say that we are continuing to work with that industry through the aerospace growth partnership to ensure that we can further enhance the industry. We wish the Zephyr team well.

Q5. [904363] Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The UK has the lowest growth in the G7. Why is the Government’s answer to that to give handouts to some of the wealthiest bankers, to fund an already lavish lifestyle, paid for by taking the crumbs off the table of those on universal credit, whose children depend on free school meals?

The Prime Minister: First, the hon. Gentleman might not have noticed but the wealthiest 1% of people in this country are now paying a bigger share of tax—28%—than they ever did under a Labour Government. If he is referring to the bank levy, may I also say to him that the Conservative party introduced the bank levy, which has raised £15 billion and is predicted to raise a further £11 billion that we can spend on public services. It is the Conservative Government who are changing the way we do it, so that we do it in a better way. We will be raising nearly £19 billion extra from the banks over the next five years—that is £3 billion more from the banks to be spent on public services.

Q14. [904373] Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Great British food is produced by hard-working farming families in this country. As we produce a new British agricultural policy, does my right hon. Friend agree that supporting food production in this country is a public good?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of food production in this country. I am also happy to commend the work of hard-working farmers up and down the country, and all those who work in our food production industry. As he will know, we now have an historic opportunity as we leave the EU to deliver a farming policy that will work for the whole industry.

Q6. [904365] Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Just minutes ago, Facebook announced that it would be taking down several pages associated with the extremist group Britain First. Does the Prime Minister join me in welcoming that? Does she not also accept that there needs to be a clear role provided by Government to give guidance to social media companies on how they operate in our democracy?

The Prime Minister: I certainly welcome that announcement by Facebook, and I am pleased to say that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has been working with these companies to ensure that they do more and act more clearly in taking down material of an extremist nature. I am very pleased to welcome the announcement that Facebook has made and I hope other companies will follow.
Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): First, may I congratulate the Prime Minister on her pioneering work in fighting modern-day slavery? However, has she been advised that a central plank of her law enforcement policy is not working, with 65 prosecutions of traffickers abandoned last year because victims feared for their safety and no reparations orders made against convicted traffickers to compensate victims for their ordeals?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. At the meeting of the modern slavery taskforce that I chaired recently—two weeks ago, I think it was—in which I have brought together people not only from across government, but from law enforcement, criminal justice more generally and other areas to look at how we are working on this issue, we were addressing exactly how we can ensure that more prosecutions go ahead in future and perpetrators are brought to justice.

Q11. [904370] Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Shockingly, in 2017 in this country, 2,120 children were identified as potential victims of child slavery. I know of the Prime Minister’s personal commitment to tackling this issue, but surely we ought to have more data. We have no idea how many of those children go missing. We have no idea how many are deported. We have no idea how many are re-trafficked. In 2018, in this country, a modern democracy, that is simply not good enough. Will the Prime Minister tell us what she is going to do about it?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very important issue. It has been a concern for a long time that we sometimes see children who have been identified as the victims of slavery and of human trafficking in a position, sadly, of being taken out by traffickers and resubmitted to the horrible circumstances that that brings to them. On the point he is making about asylum and deportation, we do not return unaccompanied children who do not qualify for asylum or humanitarian protection unless we can confirm that safe and adequate reception programmes and arrangements are in place in their home country. If we cannot confirm such arrangements, we grant temporary leave until the child is 17 and a half. Last October, we confirmed our commitment to rolling out independent child trafficking advocates across the country. This is a system we piloted previously, which will give support to those child victims to ensure that they are given the support they need and that they do not fall back into the hands of traffickers.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Like many towns and cities throughout the country, Telford has experienced some distressing cases of child sexual exploitation. The authorities in Telford have now agreed to conduct an independent inquiry to find out what happened and to give victims answers. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating two brave women—campaigner Holly Archer and Sunday Mirror journalist Geraldine McKelvie—on their work in bringing that about? Will she agree to do everything possible to ensure that the inquiry starts without delay and leaves no stone unturned?

The Prime Minister: We have all been shocked by the horrific case in Telford of some of the most vulnerable in our country being preyed upon by ruthless criminals. Of course, it is sadly not the first example that we have seen in our country. I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Holly and Geraldine on their work. It is not easy, but it is right that they have brought this case to light and that action can be taken. I am pleased that the authorities are now going to conduct an inquiry. As my hon. Friend says, it is important that that inquiry begins its work in order to get to the truth and does so as quickly as possible. I understand that my hon. Friend will meet the Under-Secretary of State for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), to discuss this issue.

Q13. [904372] Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Shortly after the Prime Minister took office, she said that she wanted to put the Government on the side of the poorest in society. She even stood in front of a crumbling sign that said that she wanted “a country that works for everyone”. However, a recent Institute for Fiscal Studies report stated that 37% of children are set to live in poverty by 2022, so what went wrong, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: We have seen 200,000 fewer children living in absolute poverty under this Government. We continue to take action to ensure that we are helping families to get a regular income by helping people into work. We are ensuring that the lowest paid in our society get a pay increase through increasing the national living wage and we are helping people with their standard of living by cutting taxes for 31 million people.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the inspirational Music Man Project in Southend, which works with people who have learning difficulties, has now set a world record for tinkling the highest number of triangles ever? Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is yet another reason why Southend should be made a city? Will she and the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), please organise a contest so that Southend-on-Sea can become the first post-Brexit city?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to congratulate the Music Man Project in Southend on that record in tinkling triangles. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office has heard my hon. Friend’s bid for Southend to become a city. I must say to him that a number of Members will of course put forward their own towns for that accolade in due course. I knew a city had to have a cathedral; I did not know that it had to have tinkling triangles.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Prime Minister will be aware that this week the notorious rastafarian John Worboys was released from high-security prison. One of my constituents, who gave evidence at his trial as a victim, wants to know why Worboys was not tested first in open prison conditions and why the Parole Board is not required to publish the reasoning behind its release decisions, including evidence of contrition?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, a case is currently before the courts, and I understand that as part of that case the Parole Board will be required to explain the reasons why it took the decision it did. In terms of the overall issue of Parole Board
decisions and their transparency, when this decision became clear, the then Justice Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, called for work to be done to look into the whole question of Parole Board decisions and the transparency around them, and that work is continuing under the current Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am immensely proud to have the world-leading research and teaching hospital of Addenbrooke’s in my constituency. Its scale and excellence means that it relies heavily on doctors from overseas, but of late it has struggled to bring some of those doctors in because of restrictions on the tier 2 visa numbers. With applications from the EU also falling, it is becoming a real problem. Can the Prime Minister reassure me and my hospital that she is aware of the challenge and that she has a plan to address it?

The Prime Minister: I am aware of that particular issue. In the longer term, one of the things that we are doing is ensuring that we can train more doctors here in the United Kingdom, but I am aware of the issue that my hon. Friend has raised and I will look into it.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Last year, the Prime Minister acknowledged that our social care system is broken and promised to fix it. Since then, two care providers in Crewe and Nantwich have been placed into special measures and another is worried that it may have to close due to a lack of funding. What does the Prime Minister say to providers who say that the local government settlement does not go far enough and that they cannot afford to wait for the Government’s Green Paper?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will know, I have always said that there were some short-term, medium-term and long-term measures that needed to be taken in relation to pressure on social care. In the short term, we have provided more funding for local authorities—£2 billion extra was announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer—and we are seeing more money going into social care in local authorities. In the medium term, we need to ensure that best practice is spread across the whole country and—we mentioned the Green Paper—we also need to ensure that we can develop a long-term, sustainable funding model for social care. That is what we continue to work on.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is sadly a matter of public record that RBS and HBOS deliberately asset-stripped thousands of potentially viable businesses to benefit their own banks or individual bankers. Evidence before the High Court indicates that Lloyds may also be guilty of the same. Will the Prime Minister consider the calls of the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking—endorsed by the chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority, Andrew Bailey—for a full public inquiry into this disgraceful scandal?

The Prime Minister: This issue is of concern to many. Small businesses are the backbone of our economy and we need to ensure that we learn the lessons from what happened at RBS and HBOS. As my hon. Friend will know, the FCA has reported areas of widespread inappropriate treatment of firms by RBS, which has apologised and set up a scheme for compensation for victims. There is an ongoing investigation being conducted by the FCA into RBS, and it is also undertaking two separate investigations into HBOS. We will continue to work with the independent regulator and the industry to ensure that small and medium-sized businesses get the support they need.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Just since Christmas, there have been five high-profile gun crimes in Haringey, including one last Thursday when a 19-year-old man, Kelvin Udunie, was shot in the head, the marksman being a pillion rider on the back of a moped, at the entrance to a cinema in Wood Green. We know that our streets are plagued by knife crime. The intent to kill with a gun takes the epidemic to a whole new level. This cannot go on and it must stop. Will the Prime Minister please meet me and community leaders to put an end to this epidemic of gun crime?

The Prime Minister: I suggest that the hon. Lady meets the Home Secretary, who will shortly publish a strategy in relation to the issue of serious violence. The use of mopeds for mugging has been known for some time, and my right hon. Friend is already looking at and working on that with the police. I am sure that my right hon. Friend would be happy to meet the hon. Lady on the issue of gun crime.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I agree entirely with the question from the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). The Prime Minister has done more than anyone in the House to end the terrible issue of modern-day slavery, but we have a problem with the treatment of child victims. They are put in the care of local authorities and, as the hon. Gentleman said, they are then re-trafficked. Can we look at having a system, as we do for adults, in which safe homes are provided centrally, not by local government, so re-trafficking cannot occur?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend follows up the question from the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) with an important point about the child victims of trafficking. I will certainly look at this issue. Having independent child advocates, to whom I referred in my response to the hon. Member for Gedling, is one way in which we can give greater support to child victims in order to ensure that they are not lost to the local authorities and re-trafficked. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it is a scandal when a victim goes into the care of a local authority, and somebody is then able to come along, remove them from that care and take them back into slavery.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order.
Salisbury Incident

12.39 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the response of the Russian Government to the incident in Salisbury.

First, on behalf of the whole House, let me pay tribute once again to the bravery and professionalism of all the emergency services, doctors, nurses and investigation teams who have led the response to this appalling incident, and also to the fortitude of the people of Salisbury. I reassure them that, as Public Health England has made clear, the ongoing risk to public health is low, and the Government will continue to do everything possible to support this historic city to recover fully.

On Monday, I set out that Mr Skripal and his daughter were poisoned with Novichok—a military-grade nerve agent developed by Russia. Based on this capability, combined with Russia’s record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations—including against former intelligence officers whom it regards as legitimate targets—the UK Government concluded it was highly likely that Russia was responsible for this reckless and despicable act. There are only two plausible explanations: either this was a direct act by the Russian state against our country; or, conceivably, the Russian Government could have lost control of a military-grade nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others.

It was right to offer Russia the opportunity to provide an explanation, but its response has demonstrated complete disdain for the gravity of these events. The Russian Government have provided no credible explanation that could suggest that they lost control of their nerve agent, no explanation as to how this agent came to be used in the United Kingdom, and no explanation as to why Russia has an undeclared chemical weapons programme in contravention of international law. Instead it has treated the use of a military-grade nerve agent in Europe with sarcasm, contempt and defiance.

There is no alternative conclusion other than that the Russian state was culpable for the attempted murder of Mr Skripal and his daughter, and for threatening the lives of other British citizens in Salisbury, including Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey. This represents an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom. As I set out on Monday, it has taken place against the backdrop of a well-established pattern of Russian state aggression across Europe and beyond. It must therefore be met with a full and robust response beyond the actions we have already taken since the murder of Mr Litvinenko and to counter this pattern of Russian aggression elsewhere.

As the discussion in this House on Monday made clear, it is essential that we now come together with our allies to defend our security, to stand up for our values and to send a clear message to those who would seek to undermine them. This morning, I chaired a further meeting of the National Security Council, where we agreed immediate actions to dismantle the Russian espionage network in the UK, urgent work to develop new powers to tackle all forms of hostile state activity and to ensure that those seeking to carry out such activity cannot enter the UK, and additional steps to suspend all planned high-level contacts between the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation.

Let me start with the immediate actions. The House will recall that, following the murder of Mr Litvinenko, the UK expelled four diplomats. Under the Vienna convention, the United Kingdom is permitted to expel 23 Russian diplomats who have been identified as undeclared intelligence officers. They have just one week to leave. This will be the single biggest expulsion for over 30 years and it reflects the fact that this is not the first time that the Russian state has acted against our country. Through these expulsions, we will fundamentally degrade Russian intelligence capability in the UK for years to come, and if Russia seeks to rebuild it, we will prevent it from doing so.

We will also urgently develop proposals for new legislative powers to harden our defences against all forms of hostile state activity. This will include the addition of a targeted power to detain those suspected of hostile state activity at the UK border. This power is currently only permitted in relation to those suspected of terrorism. And I have asked the Home Secretary to consider whether there is a need for new counter-espionage powers to clamp down on the full spectrum of hostile activities of foreign agents in our country.

As I set out on Monday, we will also table a Government amendment to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill to strengthen our powers to impose sanctions in response to the violation of human rights. In doing so, we will play our part in an international effort to punish those responsible for the sorts of abuses suffered by Sergei Magnitsky. I hope, as with all the measures I am setting out today, that this will command cross-party support.

We will also make full use of existing powers to enhance our efforts to monitor and track the intentions of those travelling to the UK who could be engaged in activity that threatens the security of the UK and of our allies. So we will increase checks on private flights, customs and freight. We will freeze Russian state assets wherever we have the evidence that they may be used to threaten the life or property of UK nationals or residents. Led by the National Crime Agency, we will continue to bring all the capabilities of UK law enforcement to bear against serious criminals and corrupt elites. There is no place for these people, or their money, in our country.

Let me be clear. While our response must be robust, it must also remain true to our values as a liberal democracy that believes in the rule of law. Many Russians have made this country their home, abide by our laws and make an important contribution to our country which we must continue to welcome. But to those who seek to do us harm, my message is simple: you are not welcome here.

Let me turn to our bilateral relationship. As I said on Monday, we have had a very simple approach to Russia: engage but beware. I continue to believe that it is not in our national interest to break off all dialogue between the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation. But in the aftermath of this appalling act against our country, this relationship cannot be the same. So we will suspend all planned high-level bilateral contacts between the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation. This includes revoking the invitation to Foreign Minister Lavrov to pay a reciprocal visit to the UK and confirming that there will be no attendance by Ministers, or indeed members of the royal family, at this summer’s World Cup in Russia.
Finally, we will deploy a range of tools from across the full breadth of our national security apparatus in order to counter the threats of hostile state activity. While I have set out some of these measures today, Members on all sides will understand that there are some that cannot be shared publicly for reasons of national security. And of course there are other measures we stand ready to deploy at any time should we face further Russian provocation.

None of the actions we take is intended to damage legitimate activity or prevent contacts between our populations. We have no disagreement with the people of Russia, who have been responsible for so many great achievements throughout their history. Many of us looked at a post-Soviet Russia with hope. We wanted a better relationship, and it is tragic that President Putin has chosen to act in this way. But we will not tolerate the threat to the life of British people and others on British soil from the Russian Government. Nor will we tolerate such a flagrant breach of Russia’s international obligations.

As I set out on Monday, the United Kingdom does not stand alone in confronting Russian aggression. In the last 24 hours, I have spoken to President Trump, Chancellor Merkel and President Macron. We have agreed to co-operate closely in responding to this barbaric act and to co-ordinate our efforts to stand up for the rules-based international order, which Russia seeks to undermine. I will also speak to other allies and partners in the coming days. I welcome the strong expressions of support from NATO and from partners across the European Union and beyond. Later today in New York, the UN Security Council will hold open consultations where we will be pushing for a robust international response. We have also notified the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons about Russia’s use of this nerve agent, and we are working with the police to enable the OPCW to independently verify our analysis.

This was not just an act of attempted murder in Salisbury, nor just an act against the UK. It is an affront to the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons, and it is an affront to the rules-based system on which we and our international partners depend. We will work with our allies and partners to confront such actions wherever they threaten our security, at home and abroad. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman must be heard. There will be adequate opportunity for colleagues on both sides of the House to put questions. Members must be heard.

Jeremy Corbyn: I could not understand a word of what the Foreign Secretary just said, but his behaviour demeans his office.

It is in moments such as these that Governments realise how vital strong diplomacy and political pressure are for our security and national interest. The measures we take have to be effective, not just for the long-term security of our citizens but to secure a world free of chemical weapons. Can the Prime Minister update the House on what conversations, if any, she has had with the Russian Government? While suspending planned high-level contacts, does she agree that is essential to retain a robust dialogue with Russia, in the interests of our own and wider international security?

With many countries speaking out alongside us, the circumstances demand that we build an international consensus to address the use of chemical weapons. We should urge our international allies to join us in calling on Russia to reveal without delay full details of its chemical weapons programme to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. It is, as we on the Labour Benches have expressed before, a matter of huge regret that our country’s diplomatic capacity has been stripped back, with cuts of 25% in the last five years. It is—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman must be heard. There will be adequate opportunity for colleagues on both sides of the House to put questions. Members must be heard.

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democracy in that country. We must do more to address the dangers posed by the state’s relationship with unofficial mafia-like groups and corrupt oligarchs. We must also expose the flows of ill-gotten cash between the Russian state and billionaires who become stupendously rich by looting their country and subsequently use London to protect their wealth. We welcome the Prime Minister today clearly committing to support the Magnitsky amendments and implementing them as soon as possible, as Labour has long pushed for.

Yesterday, Nikolai Glushkov, a Russian exile who was close friends with the late oligarch Boris Berezovsky, was found dead in his London home. What reassurances can the Prime Minister give to citizens of Russian origin living in Britain that they are safe here?

The events in Salisbury earlier this month are abominable and have been rightly condemned across the House. Britain has to build a consensus with our allies, and we support the Prime Minister in taking multilateral and firm action to ensure that we strengthen the chemical weapons convention and that this dreadful, appalling act, which we totally condemn, never happens again in our country.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raised a number of questions about the nerve agent that had been used. He asked whether we were putting together an international coalition to call on Russia to reveal the details of its chemical weapons programme to the OPCW. That is indeed what we did. We gave the Russian Government the opportunity, through the démarche that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary delivered to the Russian ambassador in London earlier this week, to do just that. They have not done so.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the corrupt elites and money going through London. As I said in my statement, led by the National Crime Agency, we will continue to bring all the capabilities of UK law enforcement to bear against serious criminals and corrupt elites. There is no place for these people or their money in our country, and that work is ongoing.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about getting an international consensus together. As I said, I have spoken to Chancellor Merkel, President Trump and President Macron. Others have also expressed their support. Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO Secretary-General, said:

“We stand in solidarity with our Allies in the United Kingdom” and

“Those responsible—both those who committed the crime and those who ordered it—must face appropriately serious consequences.”

The NATO Council has expressed deep concern at the first offensive use of a nerve agent on alliance territory since NATO’s foundation, and allies agreed the attack was a clear breach of international norms and agreements. Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, said:

“I express my full solidarity with PM @theresa_may in the face of the brutal attack inspired, most likely, by Moscow. I’m ready to put the issue on next week’s #EUCouncil agenda.”

We will be doing that.

I say to the right hon. Gentleman that this is not a question of our diplomacy or of what diplomatic support we have around the world. This is a question of the culpability of the Russian state for an act on our soil. He said that we should be trying to build a consensus. It is clear from the conversations that I have had with allies that we have a consensus with our allies. It was clear from the remarks made by Back Benchers across the whole House on Monday that there is a consensus across the Back Benches of this House. I am only sorry that the consensus does not go as far as the right hon. Gentleman, who could have taken the opportunity, as the UK Government have done, to condemn the culpability of the Russian state.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): It seems to me, without any access to closed information, that the use of this particularly bizarre and dreadful way of killing an individual is a deliberate choice by the Russian Government to put their signature on a particular killing so that other defectors are left in no doubt that it is the Russian Government who will act if they are disappointed in any way by those people’s actions. In the light of that, the only sensible question the Leader of the Opposition asked was what consultation we propose to have with NATO, other European countries and the American Government about positive action that could be taken to prevent this continuing defiance of international law and the defiance of all rules on the testing and possession of chemical weapons. This is not just a question of expressing our anger about Salisbury. This is actually a serious threat to the safety of the western world unless and until we all do something together to get the Russians to do something, as opposed to simply ignoring us.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. That is why not only are we talking to allies bilaterally, but there will, as I understand it, be a meeting of the NATO Council tomorrow at which this issue will be considered. The President of the EU Council has said that he will be putting this on the agenda of the European Union Council meeting at the end of next week.

My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right: while we rightly focus initially on the use of this nerve agent here in the UK and its impact on us here in the UK, this is about the illegal use of chemical weapons by the Russian state and an illegal programme of developing those chemical weapons by the Russian state. We will leave no stone unturned in working with our allies to ensure that we respond appropriately to that.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Let me thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement.

As the Prime Minister has said, the attack on Mr Skripal and his daughter was an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom. There has to be a robust response to the use of terror on our streets. We must act in a measured way to show that we will simply not tolerate this behaviour. In that regard, I welcome, and associate those of us on the Scottish National party Benches with, the measures contained in the statement. On this matter, I commit my party to working constructively with the Government.

I am sure that the House will join me in extending thanks to the members of the police and security services who are working around the clock on the recent case in Salisbury. It has been warming to see our closest friends
and allies across Europe expressing solidarity and support. Our friends globally must join with us by standing up to this abuse of state power by Russia. I look forward to the discussions in the United Nations, which must speak with a clear and unambiguous voice.

The fact that we are expelling the largest number of undeclared intelligence officers in over 30 years is welcome, as is the desire to examine what can be done from a legislative perspective to defend against hostile state activity. As someone who has previously supported so-called Magnitsky measures, I am pleased that the Government are signalling action in this area. Let me commend the actions of Bill Browder—I have had the opportunity to meet him—who has personally been at massive risk, but has stood up to the effects of Russian state power.

Financial sanctions are welcome, and we must redouble our efforts against any money laundering by those responsible. It must be made clear to the Russian authorities that we will not tolerate activities that infringe international law. While we support the PM’s actions, we will continue to scrutinise them carefully, and we must ensure that any proposed legislation is properly scrutinised.

Our thoughts are with those in Russia who have suffered due to the abuse of state power. There is no doubt that that is what we are seeing. In doing so, we look forward to a time when we can engage positively and to a time of peace and co-operation, but the only response today must be a robust one towards the Kremlin and Russia.

The Prime Minister: May I, once again, thank the right hon. Gentleman. May I commend my right hon. Friend for the tone of his response, but for the comments that he has made? I assure him that, of course, any legislative proposals we bring forward will have due scrutiny in this House. May I thank him for his constructive offer to work with the Government on this issue, because it is a matter that should concern us across the whole House? I reassure him that, although I made reference to a number of allies who have spoken in support of the United Kingdom on this, others have done so, too? Canada and Australia, for example, have also been very clear that a robust response is appropriate. Once again, I welcome the comments made by the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for her strong leadership and for rising to this challenge? Some in positions of leadership have also risen to the challenge, and I am only sorry that others in such positions have fallen well short.

In the conversations my right hon. Friend is due to have with his allies, which she is quite right to have, will she raise with the German Government the issue of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline on which they are engaged with the Russians? It will cut revenues for Ukraine and eastern Europe and give Russia an unparalleled ability to bully those countries in the future. If Russia is, as we now believe, a rogue state, will she try to persuade our allies in Europe and elsewhere not to treat with it or help to make it better off?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend. One of the things we will be discussing with our allies is how we ensure that the robust message about the act that has taken place on UK soil is consistently given, and continues to be given, by all our allies. Nord Stream 2 is regularly discussed at the European Union Council, as my right hon. Friend would, I suspect, imagine.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement. Her conclusion about the culpability of the Russian state is immensely serious. In addition to its breaches of international law, its use of chemical weapons and its continued disregard for the rule of law and human rights, that must be met with unequivocal condemnation. May I welcome the measures she has taken to downgrade the intelligence capability of the Russian state, and particularly the work that I understand has started with the United Nations? Within the United Nations, it is important to expose what the Russians are doing and to build the broadest possible support against them. Will she say a bit more about what she is doing on that front?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady for the strength of the statement she has just made, which I know is representative of the views of many of her right hon. and hon. Friends on the Labour Back Benches. We are taking this matter to the United Nations. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has already spoken to the UN Secretary-General about this issue. The open discussion that is taking place tomorrow is the start of the process of looking at this issue. As I said in response to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), this is not just about the incident that has taken place here in the United Kingdom; it is about the use of chemical weapons—this illegal use of chemical weapons—that has taken place and about the role of the Russian state in the development of chemical weapons, contrary to international law.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): No reasonable person can possibly doubt that the Russian Government have behaved with arrogance, inhumanity and contempt, not least in failing to respond to the Prime Minister’s deadline, which they surely would have done if they had known that they were innocent of this charge. In welcoming the Prime Minister’s expulsion of 23 diplomats who are really intelligence agents, may I ask her to make it clear that any retaliation in kind by the Russian Government will be met by further expulsions, perhaps including even of the ambassador, who spends so much time coming to talk to us in this place, bemoaning the poor state of Anglo-Russian relations? Does she accept that Russia traditionally respects strength and despises weakness and that the time has come to recognise that 2% of GDP is not enough to spend on defence when we are reverting to the sort of adversarial relationship that we had when we spent a much higher proportion of GDP on ensuring that this country was well defended?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his remarks. In response to his first point, as I said in my statement, there are other measures that we stand ready to deploy at any time, should we face further Russian provocation. On his other point, as we review our national security capability and our modernising defence programme, we are ensuring that we have the resources and capabilities available to deal with the variety and diversity of threats that this country faces. However, as those threats diversify, not all of them will be responded to by what is conventionally considered to be defence.
Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I and my party fully support the Prime Minister's statement and position. What is her response to the brave leader of the opposition in Russia, Alexei Navalny, who is not allowed to stand in the presidential election and has said that the most effective action the British Government can take is to use their legal powers, such as unexplained wealth orders, against named individuals who are critical to the Putin operation? He names in particular Mr Alisher Usmanov, who has substantial property and sporting interests, and the First Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Igor Shuvalov, who owns, among other things, a £14 million flat overlooking the Ministry of Defence. Will the Prime Minister act?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support for the Government's actions. As I said in my statement, we do, of course, look at issues regarding corrupt elites and criminal finances and at using the tools and capabilities at our disposal. The National Crime Agency is continuing that work.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her impressive leadership. I associate myself—unusually—with the leader of the Liberal Democrats in calling for greater use of unexplained wealth orders. Will the Prime Minister also use the tools at her disposal to expose the wealth of the Putin family, given that $300 billion or more has been stolen from the Russian people by that man? We should expose him for what he is, and not be a useful idiot hiding behind the legalism of his crimes.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his suggestion. Unexplained wealth orders are, of course, tools that we use, but we have to use them properly, in accordance with the rule of law, following due process.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, agree with her analysis and fully support the Government's actions. I understand that the Foreign Office has called for an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council. What does the Prime Minister think will be the likely result, given that one permanent member is engaging in unlawful attacks on another? Does she share my concern that Russia's actions in this country, in Ukraine and in backing Assad's murderous regime in Syria mean that the current Security Council mechanism is broken?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. As I said earlier, the Foreign Secretary spoke to the UN Secretary-General yesterday. Later today in New York, the UN Security Council will hold initial consultations. Obviously, Russia is a member of that Security Council, but it is important that we continue to use the international organisations that are available to us. The United Nations is a protector of the international rules-based order. That is what it should be, and we will continue to press for a robust international response.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is clear that there is almost unanimous support in the House for my right hon. Friend's proportionate and right response to this crisis. In particular, she is absolutely right to use the mechanisms of the United Nations to make it clear to everyone what has happened in this case. Will she also bear in mind that Russia has, either indirectly or directly, authorised and used chemical weapons in Syria? I thank her for what she has said about the Magnitsky amendment, which many of us across the House have been working on for some time. I hope that she will consider implementing it in full, as has happened in America and in Canada.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend picks up on a point made in the previous question: this is not simply one act by Russia, but part of a pattern of various actions, including those in Syria, the illegal annexation of Crimea and its activities in the Donbass. They also include the Russian state's use of propaganda and its attempts to interfere in elections across the continent of Europe. In response to my right hon. Friend's second point, we will bring forward a Government amendment to reflect the Magnitsky considerations to ensure that we have the strongest possible means to deal with the issues.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): We welcome the decisive action taken by the Prime Minister today, which sits in contrast to the policy of appeasement that we have heard from the Labour party Front Bench. I am sure that the people of the United Kingdom are pleased that it is the Prime Minister who is standing behind the Dispatch Box, defending the rule of law and the citizens of this country. She says that she has spoken to our allies over the past couple of days. Apart from words of support, what are the actions to which they have committed to ensure that a message is sent out about this and future actions?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks and for the Democratic Unionist party's support for the Government's action. On actions to be taken by international allies, they were, of course, waiting for us to announce the various actions that we will take following the decision taken by the National Security Council this morning. We will hold further discussions with our allies about how they can support what we are doing through taking actions themselves.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I entirely agree with the approach adopted by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in her response to this outrageous attack. Does she agree that the difficulty we face lies not so much in getting the concurrence of our allies in agreeing the nature of the outrage, but in how we craft a sustained strategy, so that those of us who believe in the rules-based international system can apply the necessary leverage and persuasion on Russia to conform to it? The very serious risk that we run is that if we do not succeed in doing that, the level of violence that Russia will exercise with impunity against other states and us will simply increase. Our allies in particular must have regard to that if we are to make any progress.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely correct that we need to address this issue in that wider sense, because it is about the way in which the Russian state is acting—it believes, with impunity—in a whole variety of ways, and the way in which it is flouting the international rules-based order. We must come together as allies to ensure that we support that international rules-based order and that we have not
just a collective agreement, but a collective approach that ensures that we can challenge what Russia is doing. He is also right that one of the points we should be making to our allies is that while this may have happened in the United Kingdom, it could be happening in any of those states.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I join others in welcoming the measures that the Prime Minister has announced today. As Russia has chosen to act against us in such an outrageous way, we have to demonstrate our determination to defend ourselves. Given that Russia’s usual response is to deny all responsibility for such actions, does she intend, as well as seeking the assistance of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in identifying the sample, to ask for that organisation to carry out an investigation, as any member state is entitled to do, including an inspection of any facilities or locations in Russia, where this nerve agent in all probability was produced?

The Prime Minister: We will be talking to the OPCW about not just the ways in which the sample of the nerve agent used here in the United Kingdom can be independently verified, but other actions the OPCW might be able to take.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I welcome the decision of the Government to refer the patienty and carefully acquired evidence of this grotesque attack to the OPCW. Is it the Prime Minister’s intention that its findings should be referred to the Russians, the United Nations and ourselves? Will she consider, in the light of those findings, going further on unexplained wealth orders and other financial sanctions against Russia if necessary?

The Prime Minister: We are asking the OPCW to independently verify this, so the nature of this nerve agent can be clear to everyone. As I said earlier, we introduced, operate and use unexplained wealth orders, but we will always ensure that they are done on evidence. We operate according to the rule of law.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister’s clear statement, her condemnation of the Russians and the action she has taken. In particular, I welcome the fact that the Government are adopting the Magnusky amendment. Too much money laundered out of Russia is finding its way into the British system. There are two things she could do pretty quickly which would help to tackle that. First, she could bring forward the public register of ownership of properties, which was promised by her predecessor in 2015 and has been delayed by this Government. Secondly, she could increase transparency in our corporate structures, so that we know who forms companies here and where the money comes from and deal with it if it is illicit money brought in by unsavoury people.

The Prime Minister: On transparency in relation to property ownership, I have discussed that with the Business Secretary. We have not been delaying. We need to ensure that we get it right when we introduce it—because we want to ensure we have all the tools in our locker that we can use and that can help us in the endeavour we are engaged in.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I absolutely 100% support the Prime Minister’s statement and the actions she is taking. Following on from the previous question, I want to pick up on the Prime Minister’s statement that there is no place for serious criminals and corrupt elites, or their money, in our country. There are amendments, which I am sure Parliament will support, but will the Prime Minister also bear it in mind that the Select Committees could have a real role in teasing out information about what is going on to tackle dirty money in this country, whether in the City of London or elsewhere, to bring evidence to the House that could shape amendments and actions the Government could then take?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for her suggestion. I recognise the role that Select Committees can play. I suspect that my right hon. Friend has just set up a stream of work for her own Treasury Committee to undertake.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I assure the Prime Minister that most of us on the Labour Benches fully support the measures she has announced today. Indeed, some of us think they could have come a bit sooner. On the wider issue of Putin’s hybrid warfare against our country, will she task the intelligence and security services to investigate Putin’s influencing operations in our universities, our think-tanks, our financial institutions and our political parties?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the propaganda activities being undertaken by the Russian state. I will certainly look at the suggestions he makes.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): We should all be thanking God today that it is my right hon. Friend in her place and not the so-called alternative. I am not expecting my right hon. Friend to comment on the detail, but this morning residents in Hyde road in Gillingham in my constituency saw the Metropolitan police and the Army in place, the street in lockdown, and vehicles and items linked to the Salisbury incident removed. I do not expect my hon. Friend to give a running commentary on current operations, but can she confirm two things: first, that she, the Government and the security services are doing all they can to keep my constituents safe; and, secondly, that she can arrange for somebody to provide a briefing to me, as the Member of Parliament, as to precisely what is happening?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to do that. As my hon. Friend will be aware, the police investigation continues. We cannot say where that investigation will take the police in terms of their further inquiries, but I will ensure that he is provided with a briefing as the Member of Parliament.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I completely support everything the Prime Minister has said today. The truth is that under Putin the Russian Federation has managed to combine all the worst facets of communism and all
the worst facets of rampant capitalism, all wrapped up inside a national security state that keeps its people poor and kills his political opponents. May I ask about the Russian ambassador? Since Alexander Yakovenko arrived, he has repeatedly lied to parliamentarians. He has tried to get Mr Speaker to stop debates on Russia happening in this House and he has tried to interfere in the internal elections of this House. Surely to God, it is time we now told him that we will order our affairs in this country, not him, and he can go home?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we will order our affairs in this country and we will not be told what to do by the Russian ambassador. I fully expect the House authorities to ensure that it is not possible for an external party to interfere in elections in this House. I would also say that it is a brave man who tries to tell the Speaker of the House of Commons what to do and to stand anything down.

Mr Speaker: I must say, for the avoidance of doubt, that he got absolutely nowhere with me. The House can be sure about that.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is noticeable that the length and breadth of this place has completely supported not just the wise words and leadership of the Prime Minister but her firm actions, with the notable exception of those on the Opposition Front Bench. That was a shameful moment. Further to the question asked by the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), democracy is a fundamental British value and there are long-held concerns that Russia has been seeking to undermine it and interfere in it. If those concerns now turn to evidence, will she take equally robust action against Russia to ensure that our great British democracy continues to be protected?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give the assurance to my right hon. Friend the action we take. We recognise that the first duty of the Government is to safeguard the nation. We treat the security and integrity of our democratic processes, as of everything else in this country, very seriously. In terms of disinformation used by the Kremlin, we know that it persistently uses it to destabilise perceived enemies. Managing that is a long-term priority for the UK. We will continue to work not just as the United Kingdom but with our international partners on efforts to counter that.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr. Alongside many colleagues in the House, I speak on behalf of my party in calling for a robust and immediate response. Sources inform us that Russia is the UK’s biggest weapons-grade nuclear substances export market, despite several attempts at a moratorium on depleted uranium by the European Parliament and the United Nations. Will the Prime Minister confirm whether the UK is still exporting nuclear substances to Russia? If so, surely this should be among the very first sanctions imposed?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks and for the support that she has given from her party for the actions that the Government are taking. What we have been talking about today is the use of a nerve agent—of a chemical weapon—on UK soil and the blatant flouting of the international rules-based order and legal structure around that use of chemical weapons by the Russian state.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): When I served as Security Minister and my right hon. Friend was Home Secretary, I became aware of her outstanding determination and dedication and of the commitment and expertise of our security services and the police who deal with counter-terrorism. She knows, as the House knows, that that is led by the Metropolitan police, but this event happened in Salisbury and could have happened in Berkshire or Lincolnshire. Will she ask the Home Secretary to look at whether our local police forces, given the dynamic nature of these threats, are equipped and informed adequately to deal with them in the first instance?

The Prime Minister: As a former Security Minister, my right hon. Friend has a particular understanding of these issues. The ability to bring in the capabilities of the counter-terrorism police, who do not just operate in the Metropolitan police, as he knows, but have regional bases around the country, is part of the layered structure that we have in relation to police forces. I am sure that he will be making sure that the police look at the immediate response that they had to this incident. We certainly do not want to see another incident of this type happening again on United Kingdom soil and that is why we are giving a very clear message to the Russian state, but we do want to ensure that all our police forces are aware of the threats that they may face.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister’s words were appropriate, measured and correct, and she has my full support. She mentioned dirty money from Russia. Can she look again at the role of tax havens internationally, including those in British overseas territories and Crown dependencies?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. As he knows, we have been taking a number of measures in relation to financial activities in the British overseas territories and dependencies, and we continue to press on those. Of course, we have enhanced our ability to deal with these issues here in relation to economic crime through the formation of the national economic crime centre. I am pleased to say, having formed the National Crime Agency, that we have now set up that national economic crime centre as part of the NCA, which brings a number of capabilities together to deal with these issues.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): My constituents of Harlow will be strongly reassured by the way in which my right hon. Friend is guarding the nation’s security. Can I ask her to condemn the remarks of President Putin, who attacked Jews and other nations for meddling in the United States elections? Given that she has also talked about the possible rogue use of these chemical weapons, can I ask her what the prospect is of such chemical weapons ending up in the hands of extreme Islamists?

The Prime Minister: First of all, I also condemn the remarks that my right hon. Friend referred to that were made in relation to certain communities in the United
States. In relation to the second part of his question, what we are talking about here is a nerve agent that was developed as part of a chemical weapons programme by the Russian state, and I think that will give him a clear message in relation to this.

**Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): I fully support what the Prime Minister said in her statement and the actions that she outlined today. I have some concerns about whether we have a proper strategy in place to combat chemical weapons attacks against this country and in particular, these small-scale attacks—it is joined up with the security services, the Government and the armed forces. Will she give me some reassurance or tell me whether work is continuing to improve that?

**The Prime Minister**: Yes. Obviously, this is an issue that we do look at and we have a strategy in place, but we will ensure, given what has happened, that we review that. We will look again to make sure that we have the best possible opportunity to ensure that this cannot happen again.

**Crispin Blunt** (Reigate) (Con): While welcoming the Prime Minister’s statement, as almost everyone else has, I join my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) in mentioning the importance of the international rule of law and say that this is a very important moment of decision for China—to decide which side she is going to sit on in this arrangement. I urge my right hon. Friend to make sure that we take the most energetic steps to ensure that China stands with the rest of the civilised world on the side of law and responsibility.

**The Prime Minister**: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue in this way. We want to see the maximum possible adherence to the international rules-based order across the whole world. In different contexts, this is a matter that I raised when I was in China recently.

**Mr Speaker**: Order. This is an extremely important parliamentary occasion and it is understandable that very large numbers of Members should want to question the Prime Minister. Can I politely suggest that colleagues should seek to ensure that their questions are as succinct as the Prime Minister’s replies have been? That way, we might get through a very great many more quickly than we otherwise would.

**Mr Chris Leslie** (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I add my support to the measures that the Prime Minister has announced and the condemnation of what is increasingly looking like a rogue state. On the question of the integrity of the United Nations Security Council, we must now begin to talk about reform. Russia cannot be allowed to simply sit pretty, thumbing its nose at the rest of the world community and feeling that it is immune from the rule of law internationally. Will she initiate that sort of reform discussion with the Secretary-General?

**The Prime Minister**: Once again, I thank the hon. Gentleman for the remarks he has made today and the support that he has given to the Government, as he did on Monday. We talk to the United Nations about reform of the United Nations in a whole variety of ways. The Catch-22 is that any decision that might be taken in the Security Council to reform it could be subject to a veto by Russia, which is sitting there, but the point has been raised not just by the hon. Gentleman but by others, and this is something that we will look at.

**James Brokenshire** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): The Prime Minister has underlined to the House that the Russian state has either been utterly reckless at best, or at worst, directly complicit in the deployment of a harmful substance on our soil. She said in the statement that she would be taking new measures to harden our defences against hostile state activity. With that in mind, will she ensure that the appropriate balance is provided between counter-terrorism and counter-espionage to ensure that our excellent security and intelligence agencies are appropriately focused to combat and directly disrupt those who would cause harm in our country?

**The Prime Minister**: I say to my right hon. Friend, who also, as a former Security Minister, has a particular knowledge and understanding of these issues, that I entirely take the point that he has made. We constantly ensure that the balance is right between counter-terrorism and counter-espionage, and we will of course continue to ensure that that balance is maintained properly.

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Responding with strength and resolve when your country is under threat is an essential component of political leadership. There is a Labour tradition that understands that, and it has been understood by Prime Ministers of all parties who have stood at that Dispatch Box. That means when chemical weapons are used, we need more than words, but deeds. May I ask the Prime Minister what more she can do to enhance our solidarity with our allies, particularly at a time when nationalist forces are trying to drive wedges between democratic countries, with some of those forces backed and supported by the Russians themselves?

**The Prime Minister**: First of all, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: there is a strong tradition in the Labour party of recognising the importance of acting in the national interest and acting when our national security is under threat. We have seen that from Governments of all complexities over the years. In relation to the point about international activity and the deeds that we need to take, it is right—we will be continuing to talk. We have been speaking to our allies, even before this event took place, about the ways in which we could deal with and address some of the activities and actions that Russia is taking across the continent of Europe and elsewhere, but we will of course redouble those efforts now.

**Mr John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of our best assets against Russian disinformation and propaganda is the BBC World Service, and will she consider ways of extending its reach, perhaps by incorporating world television? Does she also agree that we need to be very careful not to give any pretext, however unjustified, for the Russians to take action against the BBC and other free media outlets?

**The Prime Minister**: I would hope that the Russian state would be prepared to accept the importance of the free media, but sadly, from one or two things we heard last night, it seems that that might not be the case. My
The Prime Minister: I do not believe I have received any such statement from the Communist party of Great Britain, although I noticed just one or two weeks ago it said it would not stand candidates against the Labour party and that it now felt more comfortable working with it.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I strongly welcome the Prime Minister’s statement but urge her to go further and, as others have said, use energy policy as a new way of tackling this Russian threat. We all acknowledge the significant British energy interests in Russia, but will she confirm that Putin’s military and intelligence assets are primarily funded by the sale of Russian fossil fuels, and can I commend to her the EU’s energy security strategy, which was largely written in London and is reducing Europe’s dependence on Russian fossil fuels?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point—one that others across the House have made—about the extent to which Russia uses its energy and the finance it provides to influence and have an impact on countries in receipt of it. I assure him that we will continue to discuss with the EU not just our energy security but the wider energy security issue.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Many Members of this House and the other House are members of multilateral parliamentary organisations, such as the Council of Europe and the NATO parliamentary assembly. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one way we can get behind her leadership and the Government’s position is by getting the message across when we attend events and explaining the Government’s policies, what has happened and why our allies should support us?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend agrees. Many Members of this House and the other House are members of multilateral parliamentary organisations, such as the Council of Europe and the NATO parliamentary assembly. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one way we can get behind her leadership and the Government’s position is by getting the message across when we attend events and explaining the Government’s policies, what has happened and why our allies should support us?

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to criticise the Government, but he has given support to the Government—not just today but on Monday—and I welcome that and thank him.

**Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): I, too, welcome my right hon. Friend’s clear and decisive actions. Can she reassure British citizens looking to travel to Russia over the coming weeks and months that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will provide regular updates and that their safety will be paramount?

**The Prime Minister:** I can give that assurance to my hon. Friend. I suggest to those who wish to travel to Russia that they check the Foreign Office advice. My understanding is that the travel advice has not changed, but of course people should check that before they leave.

**John Woodcock** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): This is a day for the House to speak as one for the nation. The Prime Minister will be reassured to hear that a clear majority of Labour MPs, alongside the leaders of every other party, support her firm stance. Does she realise that this situation will probably get more difficult before it gets better, and is she prepared to stay the course and face down this international bully and wrecker of liberty and the rule of law across the world?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks—he made a strong statement on Monday in the House as well—and assure him that I and the Government will stay the course. As I said in my statement, we recognise that there might be further Russian provocation. If there is, we have further measures we can deploy, but it is important—and we will encourage our international allies to do this too—that we recognise that this is an important moment to stand up and say to Russia, “No, you cannot do this!”

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): The Russian economy is a fraction but its expenditure on offensive capability a multiple of ours. Is there a lesson there?

**The Prime Minister:** Of course we constantly look at the resources we put in to ensure our national security, which is assured across a number of Departments, and we continue to do so.

**Luciana Berger** (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Prime Minister’s robust response today. Further to the confirmation that no Minister or member of the royal family will attend the world cup this summer, does she believe that this should also extend to senior FA officials, and will she ask our NATO and EU allies to join us in this endeavour?

**The Prime Minister:** The question of attendance at sporting events is a matter for the sporting authorities. They will be aware of my statement today and that we are saying no Ministers or members of the royal family will attend the world cup, and I am sure they will want to consider their position.

**Mr Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): As chair of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, last year I led a delegation to St Petersburg and was met with great warmth and hospitality by many Russian people. Will the Prime Minister stress that our opposition is not to them but to their appalling leadership? The Russian ambassador has made it clear that we can now expect retaliation. Will she send a clear signal to him and Moscow that the UK will not be threatened?

**The Prime Minister:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks. I think that last night I saw the Russian ambassador quoted as saying that Russia was not a country that accepted ultimatums. Well, I can say to my hon. Friend and others that the United Kingdom is not a country that accepts threats, and we will stand up against them.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): I welcome the Prime Minister’s reminder that we have no argument whatsoever with the people of the Russian Federation, who, after all, are living under Putin’s dictatorship all the time. Inevitably, the action that must be taken against Putin will make it more difficult for organisations that seek to maintain good relations with the ordinary people of the Russian Federation. Is there anything more that the Government can do to help those organisations to continue their good work, even while we are invoking more strict and robust sanctions against their dictator leader?

**The Prime Minister:** As I said in my statement, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) said in his question, we are very clear about the fact that we have no argument with the Russian people. It is with the Russian state—with the Russian Government and their actions—that we are concerned. I think that in the response that we make, it is important for us to make that clear not just in our words but in our actions. What I have talked about today is a response that affects the Russian state and the Russian Government, but not the Russian people.

**Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): When it comes to the longer term, given the actions of the Russian state under President Putin, has the time not come for a fundamental reassessment of our defence spending—preferably in collaboration with our allies, but alone if that is not possible?

**The Prime Minister:** As my hon. Friend will know, we are one of the limited number of countries in NATO that maintain the commitment to spending 2% of GDP on defence. As I am sure he also knows, the modernising defence programme is currently being undertaken alongside the national security capability review. It is important for us to be able to deal with the variety of threats that we face. However, I must say to my hon. Friend, as I have said to other Members, that as we look at how we deal with those threats, not all of them will be dealt with in a way that would conventionally be considered a matter for the Ministry of Defence.

**Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): The Prime Minister has rightly said that the attacks in Britain have been part of an ongoing contempt for Britain, contempt for the rule of law and contempt for our values. There has also been a contempt for our alliances, both political and military. Will the Prime Minister work with those political and military alliances, so that together we can bring about a root-and-branch removal of Russian
interference in our political, educational and financial institutions? Let this be a marker: no more. Now they will fear what we will do to hit back at the interference that they have shown us.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for the commitment that she has shown, as a parliamentarian, to the alliance that we have through NATO, which is very important to us. It is the bedrock of European defence. I can certainly say that we will continue to work through those alliances to ensure that we are sending a very clear message that this is not acceptable.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister for her decisive and vigorous action in response to what was, after all, an attack on the United Kingdom. In some ways it had flashes of the Iron Lady about it. But it was also in stark contrast to the attitude of the Leader of the Opposition, who simply could not bring himself to condemn Russia for this outrageous act.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): That is not true.

Mr Francois: He simply could not do it. Is that not because he remains at heart what he has always been—a CND badge-wearing apologist for the Russian state? [ Interruption. ]

The Prime Minister: I think that people will draw their own conclusions from what they have heard today, but let me also say to my hon. Friend that I am sure that he, like me, takes great reassurance from the positive messages of support that have come from the Labour Back Benches.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): Our way of life in this country and in the west is based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law—

Emily Thornberry: When you read Hansard you will see. [ Interruption. ]

Mr Speaker: Order. Strongly held opinions have been expressed, and everyone can consult the record. I understand that there is an intensity of feeling, but the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) must have his question heard, and then the answer will be heard.

Phil Wilson: Our way of life in this country and in the west is based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and should be defended. That is why the Prime Minister is right to impose sanctions against a state that does not believe in those principles. Will the Prime Minister give a commitment to come back to the House if she feels that there is a need for further consideration of sanctions?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important point. I said in my statement that there were further measures that we might wish to deploy if we were subject to further Russian provocation, and if we choose to do so, I will of course come back to the House.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the actions of the Russian Federation are totally incompatible with membership of the Council of Europe, which believes in democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and will she ensure that we can expel Russia from the Council of Europe as a reprisal? Its continuing membership seems to fly in the face of our commitment to those important values.

The Prime Minister: That, too, is an important point. I do not think that it is within the hands only of the United Kingdom to expel Russia from the Council of Europe, but my hon. Friend will have heard our right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) suggest that Members of Parliament who are members of such multilateral groups should be making every effort to make the point about the illegitimate activity that has been undertaken by Russia.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement and the measures that she has announced, which will only be strengthened if our allies take similar action. Will she say more about NATO, and tell us whether she will be bringing together NATO Heads of State and Government to discuss a co-ordinated response?

The Prime Minister: As I think I said earlier, I believe that the North Atlantic Council will be meeting tomorrow to discuss this issue, and I shall be talking to a number of allies within NATO about the co-ordination of the response. As I also said earlier, they have been waiting to hear the details of our response, which I brought first to Parliament.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): The Prime Minister is clearly aware that the Kremlin is using a full spectrum of tools in what it considers to be its “new generation” warfare against the west—and assassination is one element of that. Is she also aware of the important work done in the 1970s and 1980s by the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in the United States to methodically expose Kremlin subversion, espionage and disinformation, which in that era were called “active measures”—aktivnoye miroviyatnoe? Will she consider the possibility of similar work in this country now? Shining the light of truth on Russian subversion today, whatever one calls it, is a critical part of defending democracy and undermining that Russian subversion.

The Prime Minister: I was not aware of the details of the work of the Senate Committee to which my hon. Friend has referred, but it is the case that this Government are not afraid to call out Russian actions in public when we see them taking place. I take his point about a more detailed and forensic look at the activities of the Russian state, and I will certainly consider it.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I support the Prime Minister’s strategy, but may I remind her that during the Putin years he has become emboldened, sometimes because our allies, in Europe and internationally, have not always been prepared to face down aggression of this kind in view of their commercial interests? If we are going to stay the course, will the Prime Minister remind our allies that they are as much under threat as we have been with this act of state terror?
The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has made a very important point. This may have happened on UK soil today, but it could have happened in any one of a number of countries. Other countries are themselves seeing other actions being taken by Russia, such as attempts to interfere in elections and propaganda and disinformation campaigns. It is important that we work together as far as possible.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): May I add my support for the cool, calm, collected and correct way in which the Prime Minister has responded to a very serious threat to this country? Would she be pleased to know that the First Ministers of both Wales and Scotland have tweeted their support for her and for the action that she has taken, and will she undertake always to keep the devolved Administrations fully informed of what is happening?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his remarks. As I said in my statement, we will freeze Russian state assets wherever we have the evidence that they might be used to threaten the life or property of UK nationals or residents. I was pleased to be able to visit our troops in Estonia last September. We are of course there with other allies, and I was pleased that at the Anglo-French summit in January President Macron committed to a continuing contingent of French troops joining our troops in Estonia. That is an important collective symbol of our determination to protect the west against Russia.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement. Given the inevitable focus over recent years on ISIS and the terrorism we have seen at home, is the Prime Minister content that across the Government, the Home Office, the security services and other agencies we have enough specific Russian expertise as well as enough resource, or do we need to increase that expertise given this event and many others which show that the Russian Government are intent on undermining our democracy?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right that in recent years there has been an appropriate and correct focus on counter-terrorism, but that does not mean we have not been looking at hostile state activity and at counter-espionage measures, because we have. We keep these in balance as we go forward and assess the threats we are facing, and we will continue to do so.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Ever since Russian troops first entered Ukraine, friends from many different countries have told me how false news stories emanating from Russian sources have been used aggressively to influence public opinion and undermine legitimate democracies. They use social media platforms and traditional media; hybrid warfare is a key part of this. Will the Prime Minister call for an international strategy to deal with hybrid warfare? Can it be on the EU agenda next week and be discussed at the NATO summit in July?

The Prime Minister: I have already raised at previous meetings of the European Union Council the issue of the Russian use of disinformation and propaganda and would expect to raise it again. We recognise the importance of the disinformation campaign work being done by the Kremlin; managing it is a long-term priority for the UK, but in doing that we will of course work with our international allies.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. If colleagues were willing to imitate the legendary succinctness of the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) in terms of the format of questions, we could probably accommodate everybody, but if there are going to be mini-speeches some might lose out.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I, too, strongly support the Prime Minister’s robust position. Does she recall the enormous efforts made during John Major’s Government to build good relations with Russia? Indeed, John Major went to see President Yeltsin, and I was lucky enough to go with him. Will the Prime Minister stress that our beef is not with the people of Russia,
with whom we share cultural links, but just with the leadership, and if we can persuade Russia to return to the rule of law we can rebuild those relations?

The Prime Minister: As I said before, our argument is not with the Russian people and we continue to recognise that this is about the actions of the Russian state and Government. As I said earlier in my statement, many of us looked at a post-Soviet Russia with hope when that was first developed, but, sadly, because of the way in which President Putin has been dealing with these matters, the picture is very different today.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): In welcoming the Prime Minister’s actions and statement, may I point out that one notable ally who has not yet spoken out against Russia’s actions in Salisbury is President Trump? Will she urge him to condemn vociferously Vladimir Putin and the Russian Government’s actions, and to do so without delay?

The Prime Minister: I spoke to President Trump yesterday and he has spoken out against this incident. We will be continuing to speak with the American Administration because they are among the allies we would encourage to work with us in a collective response to this issue.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I also commend my right hon. Friend on the package of measures she has taken today against this outrageous and illegal act on British soil. May I ask that all suspicious deaths be thoroughly investigated by the police, and that if the Russian Government are implicated in any of them, she stands by to take further tough measures against that state?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, and this question has been raised before. Of course the reinvestigation of any deaths is a matter for the police; it is for them to consider what action to take. At present, their focus is clearly on this investigation, but I am sure they will look at that matter in due course.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Council of Europe has already been mentioned as one of the platforms on which we engage with Russia, although Russia has been withholding its payments to it for some time now. There is a motion on Magnitsky before the 46 other countries, and there is also an inquiry into the death of Boris Nemtsov. Would it be helpful if the Minister for Europe and the Americas came to our next session in Strasbourg to help spread the word that we need a Magnitsky law across Europe?

The Prime Minister: I am certainly willing to look at the hon. Lady’s proposal.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): We have recently seen a marked increase in Russian activity in the Balkans, very often using the Serbs as a proxy to try to dissuade some of the western Balkan states from joining NATO. Will my right hon. Friend urgently commit to discussing with NATO how to make sure those countries can accede to it as quickly as possible?

[David Tredinnick]
Will my right hon. Friend reiterate the faith that she has in the intelligence services to be absolutely certain about the evidence that she receives? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. This is not so much about the views of a journalist. The hon. Gentleman is in order to ask for the views of the Prime Minister on the intelligence services, and that he has done. That is perfectly orderly.

The Prime Minister: I am surprised and shocked by the statement that has been put out by the spokesman for the Leader of the Opposition. [Interruption.] As I was going to say, it is clear from the remarks that have been made by Back Benchers from the Labour party that they will be equally concerned about that remark. They stand four-square behind the Government in the analysis that we have shown and the action that we have taken.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): In 2010, Gareth Williams, a British security employee, was found naked and decomposing in a padlocked holdall. The coroner ruled that it was an unlawful killing and that a professional contortionist would not have been able to get out of the bag. In the light of the events with Russia, will the Prime Minister now reopen that case to find out whether Mr Williams was indeed another victim of Vladimir Putin?

The Prime Minister: I recall the case that the hon. Gentleman has raised. As I said in response to an earlier question, investigations into criminal activity will be a matter for the police, and it is for them to determine whether they reopen the case.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): On behalf of the people of South Leicestershire, may I welcome the Prime Minister’s robust but measured statement? On Monday, I met members of the senior management of the BBC World Service at BBC Broadcasting House. The Prime Minister is correct to have told the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) that broadcasting is a matter for Ofcom, but funding is not. I understand that the BBC World Service is in communication with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Will the Prime Minister assure the House today that if the BBC World Service needs additional funding to combat Russia Today, particularly in the Balkans and the Baltic, she will speak to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about that?

The Prime Minister: My understanding is that discussions are indeed taking place on the funding of the World Service and that we expect a resolution in due course.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I should like to add my full support to the Prime Minister’s robust response today. As director of the British Council in St Petersburg from 2005 to 2008, I have first-hand experience of the utterly ruthless way in which the Russian state can operate. Does she share my concern that holding the World Cup in Russia this summer could be perceived as a global vindication of Mr Putin’s regime? If so, will she be making representations to FIFA to explore the possibility of postponing the World Cup until 2019 and holding it in a more appropriate host country or countries?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support, which is particularly valuable given his experience with the British Council. The holding of sporting events and the choice of venues are matters for the sporting authorities. The sporting authorities here in the United Kingdom will have heard what I have said today about the actions of the Russian state.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): This attack could have been so much worse. What if a group of schoolchildren playing in the park had been the first to approach the victims after they collapsed? Does the Prime Minister share my disgust that the perpetrators of this crime must have known that?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, one other individual, Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey, was affected as a first responder, but it could have been so different. It is thanks to the prompt action of the emergency services that this matter has been contained in the way that it has, but those who undertook this brazen and despicable act must have known the potential implications.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Facts are chiefs that winna ding, which is why there can be no feigning of impotence anywhere on these Benches. What is the Prime Minister’s assessment of the example advanced by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) on Monday regarding asking the Spanish Government to halt the use of their ports for refuelling by the Russian fleet?

The Prime Minister: At least one other member state of the European Union has indeed refused the Russian state the possibility of refuelling its ships. This matter is raised from time to time, and I recognise its significance and the passion with which the hon. Gentleman and his colleague have raised it.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Nobody should be surprised that Russia has denied responsibility for the attacks in Salisbury. It is a country that has denied taking part in the Olympics doping scandal and in the rigging of elections. Worst of all, it has denied any involvement in the killing of Alexander Litvinenko. Given that, will the Prime Minister please assure the House that Russia will be treated according to its actions and not its words?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We should all be clear that the attitude of the Russian state is shown by what it does, not by what it says.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement and the actions that she has outlined. She said that there was a need for a new targeted power to detain at the UK border those suspected of hostile state action. Many of us will be surprised that we do not already have that power. Is there a plan to bring forward emergency legislation, so that such a power could be put in place quickly?

The Prime Minister: The power currently exists in relation to those who are suspected of terrorism, but not of hostile state activity. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will be looking urgently at the most appropriate legislative vehicle to bring that power forward.
Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The Prime Minister was right to point out that this is simply the latest act by a criminal rogue state. We remember the Malaysia Airlines jet that was shot down, the invasion of Crimea and the support for the murderous regime in Syria. I fully support her position, and I am horrified by the statement that has been read out on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition’s spokesman. I should like to add my voice to those who have asked the Prime Minister to look quickly and seriously at financial sanctions for individuals closely associated with the Putin regime, as well as for the wider Russian economy.

The Prime Minister: We look at all the tools available across the board, but we operate within the rule of law, and there are certain criteria that need to be met if sanctions are to be applied.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and I look forward to her aggressively chasing down that dirty Russian money. There have now been 15 suspicious deaths, and I should like to ask about the prevalence of these deaths in the UK. Are there more in the UK than in similar western countries? If so, why? Is it because we have more Russians here, or because Russia is deliberately targeting the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I would just caution the hon. Gentleman when he describes all those deaths as suspicious. I believe that one of the families involved have made it very clear that they do not consider there to have been any suspicion around the death of their loved one. If the police believe that it is right to reopen cases, they will do so. It is up to them to make that operational decision.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her calibrated, proportionate and robust response. Will she join me in paying tribute to the brave British intelligence agents who serve our country? In the light of the increasingly violent and erratic approach of the Russian state, does she agree that if there needs to be a reassessment of their personal security here in the UK, that should take place without delay?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in welcoming, congratulating and thanking all those who work for our security and intelligence agencies for the valuable work that they do for us on a day-to-day basis. Each of those agencies will consistently ensure that they are considering the safety of their staff. They recognise the important work that those people do and how important it is to ensure that they are safe.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Russia has consistently behaved in this manner over a long period, but that has not stopped the elite of our major sporting organisations, such as the IOC and the proven-to-be-corrupt FIFA regime under Sepp Blatter, from allocating major sports tournaments to Russia. Does the Prime Minister agree that the elite in our sport need to look at themselves and not isolate themselves from human rights issues and criminal law when they allocate major tournaments?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will know that the elite in certain sporting organisations have found themselves under scrutiny in a variety of ways over recent years, but it is important that we all have a care towards human rights issues and other matters when such things are being considered.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s robust and proportionate statement. Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), the Leader of the Opposition’s spokesman seems to have suggested that there is some parallel between Salisbury and Iraq. Will the Prime Minister confirm that, while no weapons of mass destruction were ever found in Iraq, three people are in hospital because chemical weapons were used in Salisbury? Will she also give us an update on their condition?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. We are talking about the use of a chemical weapon—a military-grade nerve agent—against people here in the United Kingdom. That is very clear. It is wrong and outrageous that the Leader of the Opposition’s spokesman has made those comments.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): The horrendous incident in Salisbury has placed a huge unforeseen burden on local police. We know that the police service has faced unprecedented cuts, so I wonder whether the Prime Minister can give an assurance that the additional burden will be met from central resources and that it will not fall to the local police to pick up the bill?

The Prime Minister: The initial response to the incident was of course taken by Wiltshire police. When the nature of the incident became clear, the force was able to draw on support from neighbouring forces and, crucially, the counter-terrorism capability came into place. Counter-terrorism police have taken on and are running the investigation. This is about not just the resources, but the capabilities that police officers and the counter-terrorism force have brought to bear in this instance.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Is the Prime Minister able to give any update on the treatment and health of the brave policeman who was harmed after going to help, and will she pay tribute to him?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to pay tribute to Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey. As I think I mentioned the other day, I believe he said that he was merely doing his job. That is the attitude that is taken by all our police officers on a daily basis no matter what danger they find themselves in. My understanding is that he remains seriously ill, but he is conscious and has been engaging with people.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister’s reaction to the terrible incident in Salisbury is proportionate, appropriate and robust, but does she agree that we need to go further and set an example in this House? All right hon. and hon. Members should immediately and permanently desist from appearing on any Russian propagandist channels, including RT and Sputnik.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I have spoken about the actions that the Government can take, but there are actions that individual Members can also take to send a clear message.
James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I strongly welcome my right hon. Friend’s steadfastness and statesmanship in standing up to this Russian aggression. Does she agree that this attempted murder on our soil by the Russian state will not enrich the lives of a single Russian citizen at home in Russia, and that this is the autocrat’s classic con trick down the years, externalising internal discontent with aggression abroad because the leader in question knows that he cannot and will never deliver the prosperity, freedom and democracy that the Russian people are so long overdue?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Not one person living in Russia will benefit or see their prosperity or life chances increase as a result of this action. This is about the Russian state; it is not about its care for the Russian people.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I condemn Russia for this attack. The Prime Minister will know that a strong Royal Navy is a strong deterrent against Russian aggression, so will she ensure that sufficient new money is provided, so that there are no cuts to the Royal Navy or the Royal Marines?

The Prime Minister: We have of course been providing extra funding to the Royal Navy and have been enhancing its fleet. Last summer, I was pleased to go on the new aircraft carrier Queen Elizabeth, which is a fine example not just of our Royal Navy’s capability, but of this Government’s commitment to defence.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement and her robust defence of a rules-based international order. Too many people died in the 20th century to establish that order just to throw it away in the 21st century. Will she confirm what discussions does she plan to have to ensure that the whole border area is secure?

The Prime Minister: The common travel area and its operation are things that we discuss on a regular basis with the Irish Government. We have recently been looking at enhancing the security arrangements that we have put in place and we will continue to do so.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Prime Minister and all colleagues who have questioned her this afternoon.

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Integrated Communities

2.26 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the Government’s ambitious proposals to build strong, integrated communities, where people—whatever their background—can live, work, learn and socialise together based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities. The “Integrated Communities Strategy” Green Paper, published today, sets out a bold programme to deliver that vision.

Britain is a great place to live. We are one of the world’s most successful multi-ethnic, multi-faith societies, and we should take huge pride in that diversity. However, as we have seen just this week with the abhorrent “punish a Muslim” letters, there is a determination among some to try to divide. I express my support for all those who have received these hateful letters, including the hon. Members for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin). While there is a lot for us to be proud of, there is also more to do to ensure that a diverse society does not mean a divided society. In too many parts of our country, the truth is that the norm is mistrust, anxiety and prejudice—things that prevent people from taking full advantage of the opportunities that living in Britain offers. We can no longer duck the issue if we are to ensure that this is a country that works for everyone. To that end, we have identified five factors that drive segregation in our communities.

First, too many schools are segregated, even where the local population is very diverse, and unregulated settings outside school can also, on occasion, expose children to harmful views.

Secondly, there is residential segregation. In 2011, 41% of ethnic minorities lived in wards where white British people were a minority—an increase from 25% just 10 years ago. That reduces opportunities for people to mix and form meaningful relationships with those from different backgrounds.

Thirdly, disproportionately high levels of unemployment and economic inactivity reduce social mobility and can increase isolation. Sixty per cent. of women of Bangladeshi and Pakistani ethnicity are inactive in the labour market compared with a quarter of their white peers.

Fourthly, at the last census, as many as 770,000 adults in England could not speak English well or at all. Without a good understanding of our language, it is difficult for anyone to take full advantage of the opportunities available to them, and I know from personal experience just how much of a difference it made for my mother when she learned to speak English more than a decade after moving here from Pakistan.

Fifthly, there is a lack of meaningful mixing between people from different backgrounds. Evidence suggests that black, white and Asian Britons take up only about half the opportunities open to them to mix socially with people of an ethnicity different from their own. All that adds up to a conflict between religious, personal and cultural attitudes, and British values, causing increased tensions within and between communities. Women and girls are often at the greatest disadvantage.
The Green Paper sets out a framework of national priority actions to address the drivers of poor integration and to put forward a localised approach. In doing so, it sets out how we will facilitate recent migrants’ integration into their communities and how we will improve communities’ ability to adapt to migration. Success will depend on strong leadership, at both the national and local level. To ensure that the Government are leading by example, I am asking all Whitehall Departments to review their policies and to identify areas where they could do more to support integration. For example, my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary will review the Ofsted framework to see whether it could be amended to strengthen its focus on the values and principles of the UK, by which we are all expected to live.

The Green Paper includes proposals to ensure that every child receives an education that prepares them for life in modern Britain. That means giving them the opportunity to mix and form lasting relationships with those from different backgrounds and ensuring they receive a rounded education that promotes British values across the curriculum. To protect children and young people from being exposed to views that undermine our shared values, my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary will publish proposals to strengthen the enforcement policy for independent schools that fail to meet the required standard. He will also review whether Ofsted’s powers can be strengthened in relation to unregistered schools. We will stand up against undue pressure or harassment of school leaders who, having consulted, set reasonable policies that promote integration.

On employment, the Green Paper outlines how Jobcentre Plus will trial new approaches to break down the barriers to employment and support people from isolated communities into work. However, the truth is that a person must be able to speak English not only to find a job and prosper, but to play a full role in society. That is why we are proposing to develop a new strategy for English language in England and launch a new community-based English language programme.

The Green Paper also takes a robust approach to hate crime—a vile attack not just on individuals but on the tolerant and generous values that underpin British society. The Green Paper proposes strengthening local partnerships, so that they can identify and adopt the most effective approaches to tackling hate crime and encourage more people to report it. But it is clearly not enough to stamp out hate. We need to build hope and stronger communities, which the Green Paper aims to do through initiatives such as the integration innovation fund. That fund will allow organisations to bid to test out approaches to bring people together around shared activities and community spaces.

None of these measures dilutes the Government’s commitment to protect people’s legitimate rights to free speech and to practise their religion within the law. Indeed, the Green Paper reaffirms that commitment. But we cannot and will not shy away from challenging cultural practices that are harmful, particularly for women and girls. Recent news about the abuses in Telford highlights just how important the issue is.

We will also expand our Strengthening Faith Institutions programme to help a wider range of faith institutions to tighten up their governance structures, including promoting the participation of women and young people. We will support training of faith leaders to practise in the British context by ensuring they understand the British legal system, British culture and our shared values. The recent independent review of sharia law also recommended amending marriage legislation to ensure that civil marriages are conducted before or at the same time as the religious marriage ceremony. The Government share the concerns raised in the review and support that principle and recommendation. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice will explore the legal and practical challenges of limited reform to the law to reflect that.

We recognise that issues play out differently in different places and for different people, so we are going to work with five very different parts of the country: Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Peterborough, Walsall, and Waltham Forest, to develop local integration strategies and to learn how we can best address the challenges on the ground. The overall aim is to develop a set of integration measures at a local and a national level, so that we can assess what really works.

It is a sign of a mature, confident society that we can discuss these issues without lazy stereotyping or oversensitivity. I look forward to a constructive debate with all those in the House and beyond who want to focus on what unites rather than divides us. We should be guided by the evidence and an acknowledgement that we all have a role to play—both new arrivals in making a new life here, and existing communities in supporting them.

As the proud son of immigrants whose parents worked hard to get on and give something back, I want everyone in Britain to enjoy the same opportunities—to celebrate where they come from, while playing a full and proper role in British society; to see people from all backgrounds mixing freely and without fear; and to ensure that everyone, regardless of whether they are a new arrival or can trace their ancestry back to the Norman conquest, feels proud to call this country their home. The Green Paper proposes an ambitious programme of action across the Government to help achieve just that. I commend it to the House.

2.36 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his oral statement and for bringing to the House the Government’s long-awaited integration strategy. From the start, I want to echo his comments on the “punish a Muslim” letters. The individuals who sent those have no place in society. We must do much more in the House to speak for the power of diversity and the power of the contribution of people of all backgrounds to enrich all our lives.

In December 2016, we were told that the Secretary of State was studying the report’s findings very closely and that the Government’s strategy would appear in the new year. Fifteen months later, I hope the delay in publishing has given the Secretary of State sufficient time to reflect and produce a robust strategy. I welcome his decision to visit an adult learning centre in Waltham Forest this morning—a Labour council that, despite having seen its budgets slashed, is working hard for its community. The Government have much to learn from the work being done there. Imagine how much these vital services could achieve across the country if they were properly funded! The money that the Secretary of State has committed today to that authority will go far in supporting its English for speakers of other languages, or ESOL, programme.
Breaking down the barriers that exist between communities is the best tool we have to challenge hostility and mistrust. We welcome the Government’s re-focus on English language provision, but these actions do little to reverse the massive cuts that have been implemented by the Government. According to the House of Commons Library, between 2009-10 and 2015-16, funding for ESOL fell in real terms from £222 million to just £90 million. It is unclear what proportion of the £50 million will be used to reverse those cuts, but it is clear that it will not be enough to undo the damage. We recognise how important it is for people arriving in the UK to be able to speak English, but cuts to the sector have left it in a dangerous state of disrepair. Although the new funding is welcome, we need to go further. We have committed to re-establishing ESOL classes and making them free at the point of use for all those who need them.

In her report, Dame Louise Casey said: “The problem has not been a lack of knowledge but a failure of collective, consistent and persistent will to do something about it or give it the priority it deserves at both a national and local level”.

It is disappointing, then, that today the Government have announced not a new policy, but rather another consultation for a potential policy—and one that is to be implemented not nationally, but among a small selection of target areas. It seems that that disappointment was shared by Dame Louise. On the “Today” programme this morning, she said:

“it will take more than £50 million over two years and is something the whole country will have to embrace. The differences in the country at the moment are too great and we need something that heals the nation.”

Dame Louise said in her report:

“The work that has been done has often been piecemeal and lacked a clear evidence base or programme of evaluation.”

Again, she was disappointed on that today. On the “Today” programme, she said she had hoped for “big bold strategies that make seismic change”.

She also mentioned the rough sleeping unit that she headed up under the last Labour Government:

“We ended the need for people to sleep rough on the streets of this country, we drastically reduced antisocial behaviour... I would like to see coming out of their strategy something on that level.”

Also on this point, the Government need to ensure that the work they propose in this Green Paper is supported by evidence and involves a proper system of evaluation. I would welcome it if the Secretary of State provided details on that today.

The Casey review also refers to the rise in hate crime since the EU referendum—it soared by 41% after the vote. I know the Secretary of State will join me in condemning those who have stoked violence, but I am sure that he also agrees that there needs to be greater respect among Members of this House, because we should be leading by example on this.

On education, mixing with children from other backgrounds and religions throughout school life is indeed one of the best ways of preventing barriers from being erected in the first place. A former No. 10 aide said that instead of simply learning about British values of tolerance, children should be living them. How will the Secretary of State ensure that children mix with all cultures and religions, given that the new Education Secretary recently suggested he was in favour of ditching the 50% cap on religious admissions to new over-subscribed faith schools? Also, will the Housing, Communities and Local Government Secretary commit to subjecting independent schools to community impact assessments?

I hope that today’s announcement signals a new commitment from the whole Government, but an integration innovation fund to make better use of shared community spaces such as parks and libraries will do little for many communities in which those facilities have closed because of Government cuts. This strategy should be a blueprint for the type of society we wish our children to grow up in. It should be bold, ambitious and, as Dame Louise has said, “bucked with serious funding”. We welcome the broad thrust of the strategy as a welcome, overdue, small first step. Despite our criticism that it lacks some of the ambition we would like—we want the strategy’s approach to be deeper and wider—there are some positive ideas in the statement. The true test will be whether there is rigorous evaluation, and if any successful strategy is given the backing and money to expand into all areas so that extremism—both Islamist and far right—can be consigned to history, and we can go forward with a diverse, not divided, Britain.

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and for broadly welcoming the strategy. She started by mentioning the work that Dame Louise Casey has done for years on this subject, including through the report that she published. Let me take this opportunity to thank Dame Louise again for what she has done. That valuable report was an important input into the development of the strategy, as was evidence from other sources. From what I have seen from Dame Louise Casey today, she has welcomed the strategy. Of course there are things that she might have done differently, but she has broadly welcomed it, and I thank her for that.

The hon. Lady went on to mention the English language. Once again, I welcome her support in understanding that this is a major issue. We must do much more to support people who have settled in our country but speak no or little English to learn that language, for all the obvious reasons. She mentioned my visit today to the Queens Road learning centre in Walthamstow. I was very impressed with how it is run and with the people I met who have, within just a year, learnt an incredible amount of English. They talked to me about how that had transformed their lives, and I am very supportive of such activity, which is why I am pleased that a part of our plan is to help more communities to provide that kind of teaching.

The hon. Lady also mentioned funding for English language teaching. Of course funding is important, but this is about more than just that. We have committed today, for the first time, to ensure that this is a national strategy across all Departments, so for example my Department, the Home Office and the Department for Education will work together with one goal of helping people to learn English. We are also making use of community groups, which can often get to those people who need to learn English in a much more practical and sensible way than perhaps under the traditional approach. That is why we are keen to use these five pilot areas that we have named. We recognise that there is not a one-size-fits-all policy. We will need different approaches to achieve the same objectives, and we should be led by the evidence. I am glad that the hon. Lady agrees that everything should be led by evidence.
The hon. Lady also rightly condemned hate crime of all types. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), stood at this Dispatch Box just a couple of days ago to outline the Government’s hate crime strategy and how we will build on that. The hon. Lady speaks for everyone in this House when she says that hate crime of any type is unacceptable. I agree with her that people in this House should set an example, and that applies to all types of hate crime—hate crime against Muslims and anti-Semitic hate crime.

Lastly, the hon. Lady mentioned faith schools and schooling more generally. She will recall that my statement referred to segregation in schools. This is not an issue just for some faith schools; it is equally an issue for non-faith schools and in many parts of the education sector. That is why I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary has agreed not only to review what can be done, but to work with the pilot areas immediately to determine what strategies can be developed locally to try to reduce segregation. I believe that this is the first time a Government have committed to do that.

My last comment is to welcome the hon. Lady’s recognition that this is a strategy for the whole Government. This has not been done before under successive Governments. We recognise that almost every Department—some clearly more than others—has a role to play in building a more integrated and cohesive society.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): May I join my right hon. Friend in utterly condemning the “punish a Muslim” letters? Having read the text, I am appalled, and I hope that our Government will ensure that the full force of the law is put behind finding the senders of these letters and ensuring that they are punished. I think that the whole House will join in condemning the appalling way in which certain Members have been specifically targeted.

I welcome the Green Paper and the funding, and my right hon. Friend’s determination to ensure that social integration can be advanced, particularly by enabling people to speak English. I find that it is often the older members of my local Muslim community in Chesham who have not managed to achieve any great fluency in English. Many of them are women, and they are often not aware of their rights and cannot play a full part in society. What does my right hon. Friend propose so that we are able to reach older members of our communities and enable them to get the fluency in English that they should have?

Sajid Javid: First, may I join my right hon. Friend in condemning the hate crime letters that we have all heard about this week? A live police investigation is under way and I reassure her that the full force of the law will be used to find the perpetrators and ensure that they are punished.

My right hon. Friend talked about English language learning, particularly among older members of communities. She is right that that can be harder for someone who has been here for perhaps 40 or 50 years and still does not speak English properly. In trying to encourage such people to take up English, we wish to expand the process of getting other members of their community—perhaps even those of the same age group—to encourage them into settings that might be familiar and to work with them. That might be a slower process than getting them into a place such as a college to learn English, but if it is a method that works, it is what we will support.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I start by condemning the letters that have been mentioned. The Scottish National party condemns hate crime and extremism of all kinds.

While the SNP welcomes all action to promote integration, this Government really have a cheek, because 15 months on from the Casey report, Refugee Action has dubbed this Green Paper “all mouth and no trousers” without new money for ESOL, as its funding has been cut by 60% in England over the past five years. What research has the Government done into austerity’s impact on integration? The Secretary of State mentioned Jobcentre Plus, and I can tell him Jobcentre Plus asked one of my constituents to stop her ESOL class and go into work. It is ludicrous that this is happening.

This Government have pandered to tabloids and stoked up anti-immigration rhetoric for years, so they should apologise for their part in this. After all, this is a Government of “Go Home” vans; of the hostile environment; of impoverishing and making destitute asylum seekers, preventing them from working, which we know would aid integration; of deeming highly skilled migrants a threat to national security under paragraph 322(5) of the immigration rules; and of the Brexit shambles, which makes EU nationals feel so unwelcome that they are leaving the country they have made home.

We are working hard in Scotland to counter that narrative, because it really matters. Our New Scots refugee integration strategy seeks integration from day one. It is a two-way process. We would like immigration law to be devolved so that we can do more. We welcome those who have done us the honour of making Scotland their home, and I take this opportunity to thank each and every one of them, because we do not do that enough.

The Scottish Government’s strategy was drawn up in consultation with more than 700 refugees and asylum seekers. Does the Secretary of State intend to consult similarly? We allow asylum seekers in Scotland to learn English for free and encourage community-based learning, as happens in Nan McKay hall in my constituency, where some of those who came through the door for ESOL classes are now members of the board of that organisation. We have a community response through Refugee, and the people at Code Your Future want to teach coding skills to new migrants. The Scottish Refugee Council encourages people to take a cup of tea with a refugee. What consultation has the Secretary of State done with the Scottish Government, especially in respect of the life in the UK test? Will he look to Scotland for all our ideas of civilisation?

Sajid Javid: It is a shame that the hon. Lady took such an unconstructive attitude. This vital issue concerns everyone throughout the country. Of course, the policies that I have set out today primarily affect England,
although some issues, such as the life in the UK test, are UK-wide. Despite the attitude taken by the hon. Lady, we stand ready to work with the Scottish Government to further our joint goal of a more integrated society.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend on his statement and the manner in which he has presented it. I join others in condemning the terrible atrocities that Members from across the House have suffered as a result of hate crimes committed against them.

Some 161 languages are spoken in my constituency in our schools alone. My right hon. Friend will be aware that the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee conducted a brief inquiry into the Casey review, and I suspect that we will return to this subject again.

One problem that my right hon. Friend has not mentioned is that children are often withheld from schooling. Children who are in schools learn English rapidly and become part and parcel of society; children who do not go to school and are withdrawn from education often do not pick up English very quickly, if at all. That means that they are not able to play their full part in society. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what he will do to make sure that young children who are withdrawn from education are properly educated and mix with other children, so that they get the opportunity to integrate into society?

Sajid Javid: I commend my hon. Friend on his remarks. I note that he represents what is probably one of the most diverse constituencies in the country, and it is all the richer and culturally stronger for that. He raised the particular issue of English and schooling. He is quite right—the evidence shows this—that some people abuse the freedoms that we give to schooling by taking their right—the evidence shows this—that some people abuse the freedoms that we give to schooling by taking their education for granted. He is quite right to refer to the central importance of—we will not hesitate to do so.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s proposals, particularly in the context of Bradford, where we met previously. Bradford is doing some great work on integration, whether through the Science and Media Museum’s gaming festival, the literature festival or, indeed, Bradford’s curry festival. The truth is, though, that this Government’s cuts of more than £130 million to ESOL provision have decimated the local infrastructure available to deliver the plans that he is talking about. What assurances can he give that my city will not be left with a shoestring budget with which to deliver this vision of his?

Sajid Javid: I assure the hon. Lady that we share the same goals. I know that she cares deeply about this, as we have spoken about these kinds of issues before. As she knows, Bradford is one of our pilot areas, and we have already started work there. It does not have to wait; this has already started. Bradford will have access to new funding for that work, and we want to work with people there to innovate. We want to listen to their ideas, because they are the people on the ground who are dealing with these issues day in, day out. The hon. Lady is right to refer to resources, which are of course important, but practice and how things are done are equally important, and we want to learn from that, too.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On sharia councils, how do we protect people who are ignorant of their rights or subject to peer pressure in closed communities?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend asks a good question. Once he gets a chance to read the Green Paper more closely, he will see that we have set out a programme of how we want to make sure that more people, including imams in mosques, make people aware of their rights. If we have to take direct action to prohibit something—I gave the example of a change in marriage law, and in that case we would need to make sure that women in particular were not being abused and taken advantage of—we will not hesitate to do so.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): There is much in the direction of the proposals to support. The Secretary of State is right to refer to the central importance of women to the development of the strategy. I have seen some superb examples of best practice locally, including work with supplementary schools and with parents through Sure Start centres, as well as other forms of outreach, including the kind of peer-to-peer approach to which the Secretary of State referred. He is, however, completely wrong to say that all this is about more than money. Local authorities need the capacity to sort out such outreach work and to ensure that, whether it is done through community groups or the local councils themselves, it is able to happen. When will he make sure that councils have the resources that they need to turn what is a consensual vision on integration into practical reality?

Sajid Javid: To be clear to the hon. Lady, I am not saying that money is unimportant. Proper funding is of course essential but, equally, using that funding appropriately and in the most efficient way is just as important. She refers to examples from throughout the country. Where councils and community groups have done good work already, they should continue to do that work and we should all learn from that.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I am grateful for the Secretary of State’s statement. I also wish to highlight the importance of women, especially because they, too, educate their children. What work has my right hon. Friend done to look into how he can reach women in a healthcare setting so that, as he outlined in his statement, the messages cut across Departments?

Sajid Javid: I said earlier that this is a cross-Government strategy, and that includes work with the Department of Health and Social Care. In putting together the strategy, we have looked at ways—through local councils or community groups, for example—to make sure that people, particularly women, in some of these communities are aware of their health rights and what is available. One example is that as the Department for Work and Pensions rolls out universal credit, more and more people come into contact with the system and register for the first time, and we are able to look into ways to use that
information to ensure that we can help more people, especially those to whom other services can perhaps be offered, to ensure that they get those offers.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Back in 2001, we had the race riots, followed by the council report, and we have heard all this before from different Governments, including the current one. How can we be guaranteed that the strategy will actually make a difference? When will the Government address the fact that, for legitimate and sensible reasons, people chose to live segregated lives? What are the Government going to do to try to make them integrate rather than choose segregation?

Sajid Javid: We should not be allowing people to choose to live segregated lives; that is not something that will help them, especially in the long term. It is not good for them and it is not good for the rest of society, and that is really at the heart of the strategy. We cannot force people to integrate—of course not—but the Government can do a lot, working with local government, community groups and others, to encourage people to integrate. The hon. Gentleman is right that Governments have tried this in the past, and they have had some success, but I believe that this is the boldest, most far-reaching strategy that has been presented by any Government.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I unreservedly condemn the hateful letters sent to Muslim MPs, including the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) in my county.

In South West Bedfordshire, we have some wonderful examples of the integration of the Traveller community, particularly where they live among settled residents, with the children attending school and the parents getting into work. I remind both my colleagues on the Front Bench—the Secretaries of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and for Education—that the race disparity audit showed that the Traveller community in this country has the worst outcomes. I say gently to them both that our planning policy does not help in that respect, providing as it does unnecessary separation. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that his welcome proposal will include the Traveller community to make sure that they are properly integrated for the benefit of everyone?

Sajid Javid: I can assure my hon. Friend that when we talk about integration it is about all communities, not one or two, and including, of course, the Traveller community. He is right to point to the race disparity audit, an important piece of work that showed these kind of disparities, especially in education standards for children from the Traveller community, which are not where anyone would want them to be. We are taking action through the race disparity audit work, and my hon. Friend may be aware that we will shortly publish a consultation on planning issues regarding the Traveller community.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his condemnation of the literature that I, colleagues and other members of the Muslim community have received. I also welcome the tone of his statement: in the past, certain kinds of proposals were reflected in a way that stigmatised certain communities, particularly the British Muslim community. Does he agree that fundamental to promoting integration is providing security and protection to minority communities, so that they have the confidence to live together with others? In many parts of the country, especially where there are small numbers, and given the rising level of hate crime, people still do not have that confidence. I welcome the cross-Government strategy to make sure that protection against discrimination will get a high priority as part of the programme alongside the other measures.

Sajid Javid: I again condemn the hate crime letters that have been sent to so many people, including the hon. Lady and other hon. Members. As I have said, that is unacceptable in every way, and I assure her that the authorities are doing everything they can to find the perpetrators and punish them for what they have done.

The hon. Lady is correct in her point about giving people protection and confidence. I have seen examples of that throughout my life but especially in my research in preparing the Green Paper. In fact, the visit I made today to Waltham Forest showed me that, and it was great to hear the stories of the women I met about how they have built up confidence to meet others, to learn English and how that has transformed their lives.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement, and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to Dame Louise Casey and Amanda Spielman, who have taken on difficult integration issues with real guts. My right hon. Friend will be aware of my political background in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and my serious concerns—shared by children’s services officers—about the integration and oversight of a portion of children who are home educated. While I appreciate the work and dedication of the genuine home-educating community and their right to make that choice, will he consider implementing a ban on the home education of children in households that contain a member who has been convicted of any terrorist-related or hate crime offence?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for the work that I know she did to promote integration and community cohesion as a councillor in Tower Hamlets. She raises the important issue of people abusing the valuable right to choose home education for their children, and that is why, under the strategy that my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary has set out, we will review the guidelines for home education and particularly look at those instances—there is evidence of them already—in which people claim to be home educating their children but are in fact sending them to unregistered, unregulated schools, which is clearly a bad outcome for those children.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I broadly welcome the strategy and the opportunities it provides to Bradford to become a more cohesive place for all. I urge the Government to make sure that their aims and ambitions are matched by sufficient funding to make them a reality. I also ask the Secretary of State to realise that the root cause of many of these problems is a lack of opportunity. There are too few good jobs, low levels of educational attainment and, ultimately, too many
people living in poverty. If we truly want more integrated communities, we have to deal with those fundamental issues.

**Sajid Javid:** The hon. Lady is right to raise the importance of opportunities and how having a more integrated society will help with that, particularly learning English, but it is about a lot more than that and other skills are required as well. It is good that we have a strong economy with more people—including more women—employed than ever before. That is a prerequisite, but of course there is a lot more to do, and I hope she agrees that the strategy will help.

**Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** I join colleagues in condemning the letters that have been received by other hon. Members. An attack on one MP for doing their job is an attack on every single one of us and our democracy.

During my time in Coventry, I saw at first hand what faith communities could do to bring people together, and I spoke at temples about my faith. What role does my right hon. Friend see faith communities, especially groups such as the Church of England, playing in delivering this strategy?

**Sajid Javid:** My hon. Friend gives me an opportunity to thank and congratulate so many faith communities of every faith that do so much to bring people together. I have seen some excellent examples, whether in schools or through mosques, churches and temples. I hope that those faith communities that are already doing good work and have good practice will bid for some of the funds under the strategy, especially the innovation fund, and benefit themselves as well as allowing others to see what they can do.

**Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab):** I endorse all the comments that have been made about the appalling letters. I also welcome the publication of this strategy, not least because it incorporates many of the recommendations of the all-party parliamentary group on social integration of which my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) are members. I also welcome the fact that the Secretary of State acknowledges that integration is a two-way street and does not fall into the trap of conflating integration with counter-terror, which has been deeply unhelpful in the past.

It is so important that we emphasise that the three-quarters of a million people he refers to who are not fully proficient in English want to learn English. The fact that they do not know English well is not because they do not want to. Just like the Secretary of State’s mother, they want to learn English. Much of our discourse across the House today has looked at divisions along racial, immigration and religious lines, but the divisions go beyond that. We have major divisions between the different generations and, most importantly, we cannot forget the big divisions between socio-economic classes in our country. I hope that in the implementation of the strategy he will take that on board and look at integration holistically, bringing in all the characteristics that sometimes divide us from each other, but on the whole, I think this is a very positive move by the Government.

**Sajid Javid:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for those comments and for the work that he has done as chair of the APPG on integration. When the report to which he referred was published I read it carefully. Indeed, it has helped me and my team to develop the strategy today, so I welcome the work that he has done and continues to do on this important issue. He is right to emphasise that it is a two-way street—I agree and it is in the strategy. This is all about community integration and building cohesion, not about extremism, and he is right to emphasise that.

On the hon. Gentleman’s point about people wanting to learn English. Of course, a small minority will not see the advantage of doing so, but it is our job to make sure they realise how it can really help them, and so we have a role to play there. I saw a fantastic example in Waltham Forest this morning, where all the women I met were so eager to learn and to show off how well they could speak English after only a year or so. That was good to see.

The hon. Gentleman was also right on his final point about breaking down divisions and taking what he rightly described as a holistic approach, rather than a narrow one, and I very much agree with him on that.

**Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con):** I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. As someone who grew up in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, I remember the importance of voluntary societies’ work in helping to reach out across communities. During the Afghanistan war, many brave local people helped to support the British Army, acting as translators, and some needed to be evacuated as they were at risk themselves. Three families came to Chelmsford. The fathers spoke English, but the three women did not. The local women in Chelmsford reached out and started a project called English for Women, which now meets three mornings a week. Many dozens of families and women help, as do lots of retired teachers. It is a cross-communities and cross-faiths project and a fantastic example. Would my right hon. Friend consider visiting it and helping to twin such organisations with other volunteer organisations across the country?

**Sajid Javid:** I will absolutely consider visiting Chelmsford and learning for myself about English for Women. It sounds as if the project has done fantastic work, and those lessons can be learnt by others. I encourage the group to make an application to our new innovation fund, as it sounds as if it could very much do with that help.

**Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD):** Hon. Members would be forgiven for wondering what on earth the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross would have to say about this matter. Nevertheless, over the years a great number of Poles have come to live and work in my constituency and the Scottish highlands, making a very important contribution to our local economy. We are extremely grateful and they have integrated extremely well. The Department for Education has played a hugely important role in achieving this, particularly with teaching English, but I want to mention the police force. Police Scotland has been extremely hard to build up the confidence of the Polish community, which is very important to highly effective policing. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is crucial that local police forces in other parts of the
UK have the confidence of ethnic groups, that they build on that confidence and that action should be taken—encouraged by Her Majesty’s Government—when there could be improvement in building up that confidence?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman on the importance of ensuring that the local police force, wherever that might be, is seen as very much a part of the local community. After all, we police by consent in this country. That is a valuable principle that means ensuring that all communities feel that the police are there for them. I have discussed this subject with the Home Secretary, who equally takes this to be an important matter. It is one of those issues that we should continue always to look at, to ensure that we are doing the best thing possible.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): I echo the sentiments and statements made by my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna). Will the Secretary of State tell me what equality impact assessment has been made on funding for the five pilot areas? One of those areas is my constituency of Peterborough. I note that the Secretary of State has said that he does not want further division, so I wish to ensure that funding is available.

Sajid Javid: It sounds like the hon. Lady welcomes the fact that Peterborough is one of the pilot areas, which is good to hear. We started work with Peterborough a while back and it is very keen to work with the Department. We have been working with Peterborough on ideas and it is clear that each initiative that it puts in place will have to be properly funded, and we look forward to working together on that basis.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the money being given to my borough, the Borough of Waltham Forest. Had the Secretary of State had the courtesy of giving me more than an hour’s notice this morning, I would have happily joined him on his visit to my constituency to meet the women and, indeed, men of Walthamstow, where we have a strong track record of community engagement. I am sure that our community would have told him that we reject the dog-whistle politics that sees integration as a one-way street and that, as a community that has received the “punish a Muslim” letters, we have stood together to say that this is not in our name. But we would also have told him that the challenge to integration in our borough is not just about being able to speak the same language; it is also about having the time to put down roots and get to know each other—something that spiralling rents and house prices put at risk. Will he commit to tracking what impact churn and housing tenure have on integration, and will he join us all in looking at how we can have longer and more secure tenancies to give people the opportunity to know that good neighbours can become good friends?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can give the hon. Lady that assurance. First, let me apologise. It is completely unacceptable and wrong if she only got one hour’s notice of my visit this morning. I was hoping to see her there, but I now know why that was not possible. I assure her that I was very impressed by what I saw at the Queens Road learning centre, where I met the council leaders responsible for the programme. I would like to see more of that activity across the country, not just in Waltham Forest and the pilot areas. She is right about helping people to put down roots and learn from other members of their community. As an example, as well as the ESOL classes I saw at the Queens Road learning centre, there was a group called “community chat”, which is designed to help people not just to learn English, but to make friends and make them more comfortable in their local community.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): As an MP for Bradford, I enthusiastically welcome this statement. I invite the Secretary of State to Keighley, which is the jewel in the crown of Bradford, to view progress at a later date. A day’s notice will be fine. Does he agree that it is particularly important that parents in Keighley and Bradford can speak English, so that they can guide their children at school and in their choice of friends, careers and so on? Does he also agree that it is important that churches and mosques that quite rightly promote the value of family life get behind this promotion of English teaching?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Anna Soubry.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con) rose—

Sajid Javid rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Oh, I am sorry. I meant to call the Secretary of State.

Sajid Javid: I thought you were calling me Anna Soubry there, Madam Deputy Speaker. [Laughter.]

I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of mosques, churches, temples and other faith institutions, and the role that they can play not just in serving their faith communities, but in building cohesion. As I mentioned in response to an earlier question, I have seen many examples of that. They have an important role to play when it comes to learning English, particularly in encouraging those who might otherwise be reluctant.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Anna Soubry.

Anna Soubry: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker; my apologies to the Secretary of State. I have just heard that Round Hill Primary School has issued a letter to all its parents because some of its Muslim families have received these horrible and hateful letters. I know that the Secretary of State will join me in expressing his complete condemnation of that. Does he also agree that, although that is hate, a lot of this stems from the twin problems of ignorance and blind prejudice and that we should all—whatever community our lives touch—do everything that we can to get rid of that ignorance and prejudice that, in its extreme form, ends up with people sending horrible, hateful, very seriously criminal and offensive letters?

Sajid Javid: I join my right hon. Friend in condemning whoever may have sent those letters to the parents at the primary school in her constituency, and I extend my support to those parents. What she has outlined really goes to the heart of this strategy, which aims for everyone to recognise that, when we reduce segregation and build a better integrated society, we build more trust between
people, help them to get on better and help them to put aside any prejudices that they might have had. That is why it is so important that we see this strategy through.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Restoring the ESOL funding that has been cut since 2010 would be a really big way of improving integration. I was really pleased to see the Secretary of State for Education on the Treasury Bench during the statement, because I have a question about home education. Will the Secretary of State say a little bit more about the approach that he thinks is likely to be adopted? The last time that Parliament discussed home education, his party took a very firm view that they did not want any regulation at all. It is interesting to note that Government Front Benchers may have moved from that position, and I would be interested to know a little bit more about that.

Sajid Javid: The first thing to recognise is that home education is a valuable and important right, and that will not change. There are many examples of excellent home education, and we welcome those. But we have also, sadly, seen examples—some have been reported recently—where home education has led to a bad outcome for those children and has not helped them or wider society. There will be work across the Government, led by the Education Secretary, who will review the guidelines on home education and ensure that all children being home educated are properly registered. At this point, there is no register of who is being educated at home. We want to ensure that the rights that are very valuable to home education are not abused and that they are protected.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I agree with the Secretary of State on the role of faith groups in the pursuit of integration. Will he join me in congratulating the Well Project in my constituency, which is underpinned by the Caritas organisation in helping refugees and asylum seekers to integrate through the provision of English as an additional language and through women’s and girls’ leadership? I have to say on a practical level, though, that since the Government privatised the refugee and asylum resettlement project, services have gone backwards. There is a lack of spatial planning, local authorities are being cut out of the equation, and there is no integration with the rest of civil society. We are going to have to work 10 times as hard to catch up with the model we used to have.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman raises the important issue of resettlement. He might be interested to know that one of the policies that we will be reviewing through the Green Paper is about providing the support that is given to people who rightly and legitimately settle in this country on a long-term basis, because we have tended to have an approach, under successive Governments, where once people have their leave to remain, they are left on their own. It is very important to have an approach where they are constantly provided with information and helped along with the process—perhaps a process that eventually leads to citizenship. I am pleased that the Home Secretary will be reviewing that.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): I congratulate this House on its total cross-party condemnation of the vile messages that have gone to some of our colleagues. There is no place in this country for such prejudice and hate.

Broadly, I welcome this national strategy. I am extremely pleased that Blackburn with Darwen is going to be a pilot area. As I am sure the Secretary of State is aware, we have a number of fantastic examples of where the communities have integrated, and we are constantly working towards that. I have spent my whole political life working on cohesion and integration for Blackburn because that adds value to the town and to the people and makes it a better place in which to live and work. Will the Secretary of State clarify how the resources will be used, because in tackling integration we also need to tackle social and economic issues? I plead with him to come to Blackburn and share some of the experiences of our communities.

Sajid Javid: Let me take this opportunity to thank the hon. Lady for all the work she has been doing for Blackburn, and long before she became a Member of this House, as the former leader on community cohesion and integration. That work is well known to my Department and Ministers, but also among wider communities that have looked at the experience of Blackburn. She has set a real example and I thank her for that. This is one of the reasons Blackburn is a pilot area. We think that it has been especially innovative in this regard and can do more. We want to work with it but we also want others to learn from it.

The hon. Lady mentioned resources for social and economic issues. The Green Paper talks about resources specifically for integration. However, that will help to leverage in other funding that is available for skills, perhaps, through the Department for Work and Pensions or the Department for Education and others. That is an important way to look at the resources that will be available.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees, I welcome the Government’s integration strategy, as we recommended one in our inquiry last year. I will send the Secretary of State a copy of the report of that inquiry, which looks at refugees who so desperately want to work and contribute to the economy of our country—the country that has granted them asylum. Will he consider meeting me to discuss how some of the more granular points in the inquiry’s findings relate to his strategy?

Sajid Javid: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): A perfect ending.
Supervised Drug Consumption Facilities

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

3.24 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about supervised drug consumption facilities; to make it lawful to take controlled substances within such facilities in specified circumstances; and for connected purposes.

On Monday, one of my constituents mentioned to me that Glasgow already has drug consumption facilities: they are behind the bushes near his flat and in his close when it rains. Right now, they are also in bin shelters, on filthy waste ground and in lonely back lanes. They are in public toilets and in stolen spaces where intravenous drug users can grasp the tiniest modicum of dignity and privacy for as long as it takes to prepare and inject their fix. Often they are alone, and, far too regularly, drug users will die as a result. As a society, we can and must do much better than that.

There is a real and persistent issue in Glasgow. In 2016, 2,593 opioid-related deaths were registered in England and Wales. In that same year, 867 were registered in Scotland, and of those, 257 were in the city of Glasgow. We have an ageing population of people with long-term problem drug use. They are increasingly vulnerable and require particular interventions to reduce harm and encourage them to engage, and remain engaged, in health services. The largest cohort of drug users in Scotland are currently aged 35 to 44. This ageing population—people who have survived since starting to take drugs in the 1980s and 1990s—are in deteriorating health. Owing to their sustained opiate use, they are assessed as having a physiological age 15 years greater than their actual age. They have complex co-morbidities, with above population-level instances of conditions including COPD—chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—and asthma, hepatitis C, liver disease, epilepsy, deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism, skin infections and cellulitis, depression and psychosis. This population is vulnerable to overdose and to emergency hospital admission.

The Scottish Drugs Forum has carried out research interviews with a large group of older people with a drug problem. This group feel very strongly that they have been left behind—that they are seen as a waste of space. This House needs to recognise that abstinence-based programmes will not necessarily work for everyone and that harm reduction and support will be better and more worthwhile interventions for a group of people who have not managed to eliminate drug use in the preceding decades. Evidence shows that long-term engagement in treatment is a positive protective factor. The people in Glasgow who would use this facility are not in treatment. The facility would get them through the door and would provide a range of other social and medical support to help them to stabilise their lives.

The report, “Reducing Opioid-Related Deaths in the UK”, published in December 2016 by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, recommends that “consideration be given—by the governments of each UK country and by local commissioners of drug treatment services—to the potential to reduce” drug-related deaths “and other harms through the provision of medically-supervised drug consumption clinics in localities with a high concentration of injecting drug use.”

The report cites evidence demonstrating that such facilities reduce injecting risk behaviours and overdose fatalities. Furthermore, it says:

“They have been estimated to save more money than they cost, due to the reductions in deaths and HIV infections that they produce…Such facilities have not been found to increase injecting, drug use or local crime rates. In addition to preventing overdose deaths, they can provide other benefits, such as reductions in blood-borne viruses, improved access to primary care and more intensive forms of drug treatment. No deaths from overdose have ever occurred in such facilities”.

Glasgow has a proposal—a well-worked-through business case produced by Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership, which is supported by the Scottish Government. Drugs law remains reserved to Westminster, and Scottish Ministers have requested permission from the Home Office to allow the proposal to go ahead. This has not yet been granted. This proposal has the real potential to reduce drug-related deaths and ongoing harm. It is for an integrated service, as also recommended by the ACMD—not just a “shooting gallery”, as some have suggested. It will allow engagement with a population who at the moment are not being assisted very well at all. There will be medically trained staff who can supervise and administer life-saving naloxone should it be required.

Some may say that this is an unnecessary expense. I say to Ministers on the Front Bench that it will certainly cost them nothing. For Glasgow, there is a significant cost in not doing this. There is a cost in treating the latest HIV outbreak and in treating hep C and other conditions. There is a cost in emergency hospital admissions and ambulance call-outs and in police time dealing with complaints. There is a significant cost in cleaning up discarded needles, with residents being charged by their factor for a problem not of their making and the council picking up the tab for public spaces. A housing association told me how it is regularly paying to clear up areas of hundreds of discarded syringes. A constituent tweeted me today to say that there are syringes on her doorstep. There is an ongoing public health risk to residents, who at any time could be pricked by a contaminated needle, and of course, there is the intangible cost in human lives. We should consider all those costs that we are currently paying in a situation that helps no one.

Heroin-assisted treatment has been mentioned as an alternative to a supervised drug consumption room, and I would like to touch on some of the limitations of that. The Glasgow proposal includes provision for heroin-assisted treatment, but I would like to stress that while it can be a treatment for those for whom many other interventions have failed, it is not suitable for everyone.

There are also capacity and cost issues. Glasgow city centre is thought to have a population in the region of 500 injecting drug users. The Glasgow city health and social care partnership believes that it would only have capacity for 40 to 60 individuals for heroin-assisted treatment, and only when the service was running to full capacity, which will not happen for some time. I understand that the service also requires two separate licences to operate: a premises licence, which is in the gift of the Home Office, and a prescriber’s licence,
dependent on the premises licence, for individual doctors directly linked to the site. It is not a simple process, but it has been developed very much alongside the proposal for a supervised drug consumption facility.

To operate a supervised drug consumption facility requires the consent of the Home Office. Those operating, working in and using the facility require protection in law; hence my Bill seeks to exempt staff and those using drugs within the facility from prosecution and remove liability for prosecution from the operators of the facility—in this case, the Glasgow city health and social care partnership.

The supporters of the Bill come from a range of parties: Labour, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and even the Conservatives. A letter that I wrote to the Home Secretary earlier this year, ahead of the debate led by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), garnered similar cross-party support from MPs right across Scotland. I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who said in giving his support that “we should reach out to help those in the grip of drug abuse and do what can be done to help them escape the vile grip of the gangster pushers and dealers.”

This facility is very much a step in that direction.

In my 11 years as an elected member in Glasgow, the issue of drug taking has been a constant. I have seen various police initiatives shunt people around, from bin shelter to close to waste ground. I have seen the council clear up the mess at significant cost and significant risk to its workers. I have seen residents at their wit’s end, worried about what they will open the door to in the morning, with blood, excrement and used syringes on their doorsteps daily. I have seen vulnerable and desperate women and men injecting into their groin in hidden but still public places; they have nowhere else to go. I have listened to the heartbroken families who have lost loved ones. If it was their choice, they would not have their loved one die alone in a filthy back lane. They would want a medically supervised facility where treatment could be given and help could be sought.

The status quo serves none of these people well. I cannot accept that this is the best we can do. It is unacceptable. We must try something different. I accept that it may not work, but we must at least try. Today is International Ask a Question Day, and my question of the UK Government is this: Glasgow has a plan that could reduce drug-related nuisance to residents, reduce harm to drug users and save lives, so will the UK Government let Glasgow get on with the job? I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Crispin Blunt, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Joanna Cherry, Ronnie Cowan, Christine Jardine, Stephen Kerr, Stuart C. McDonald, Ian Murray, Liz Saville Roberts, Mr Paul Sweeney and Dr Philippa Whitford present the Bill.

Alison Thewliss accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April, and to be printed (Bill 184).
European Affairs

[Day 1]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the general debate on European affairs. The theme of today’s debate is international trade.

3.35 pm

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): I beg move.

That this House has considered European Affairs.

I welcome the fact that we are having this debate, which is perhaps a return to the tradition of a pre-European Council debate in the House of Commons. I used to take part in those twice-yearly debates. When I checked my last contribution, which was in June 2008, I was reminded that I, like so many other Conservative Members, called for a new approach in Europe in the immediate aftermath of the Irish rejection of the Lisbon treaty. The purpose of today’s debate, however, is not to dwell on missed opportunities in the past, or to reflect on what might have been had the EU reformed itself; we are here to look to the future, and the Department for International Trade is at the very centre of that bright future.

Before I turn to the future of our trade with Europe and the negotiations under way, it is important to take stock of what we have achieved so far. The joint report issued in December sets out a financial settlement that honours commitments we undertook as EU members, just as we said we would. It agrees to avoid a hard border in Ireland, while respecting the UK’s integrity, which was and is one of the Government’s priorities for these negotiations. Very importantly, it safeguards the rights of EU citizens living in the UK and of UK nationals living abroad, which the Prime Minister has always said was her first priority. Some 17% of my constituents in Chelsea and Fulham are nationals of other EU countries; indeed, my wife is an EU national. I have put in a lot of time and effort in outreach to them, and I can report to the House that the December agreement landed very well among EU nationals there.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): The Minister is right to pay tribute to his Department’s staff. First, has he noted the comments of the Department’s recent former permanent secretary to the effect that, if we are to leave the European Union, non-EU trade will not make up for the loss of trade that we currently enjoy with the EU? Secondly, the Secretary of State was part of a campaign that promised that we would start negotiating new trade agreements with other non-EU countries as soon as we voted to leave. How many of those new trade agreements are being negotiated right now?

Greg Hands: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that this is not an either/or situation: it is not a choice between having trade with the European Union or with the rest of the world. The Government’s objectives are clear, namely, to secure a deep and comprehensive partnership with the European Union while still being

We are also making strong progress on our trading relationships outside the EU, which is my primary responsibility as Minister for Trade Policy.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): To follow on from that point, my right hon. Friend has repeated two points from December, and at Prime Minister’s questions the Prime Minister repeated her full commitment to the December agreement on Ireland. When he says there will be no hard border, I assume that means there will be no physical infrastructure. I of course recognise that we will not have a border down the Irish sea, but does he accept that, if there is no other way of achieving it, we are going to have the full regulatory convergence to which the Government signed up in the December agreement?

Greg Hands: I reiterate that what the Prime Minister said at Mansion House and at Prime Minister’s questions this week still stands. I refer my right hon. and learned Friend to the papers published last summer by the Department for Exiting the European Union on how a proper border between the two parts of Ireland can be effectuated through the two possible types of customs agreements between the UK and the European Union.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I asked the Prime Minister during her statement, and I have written to her, about paragraph 47 of the December agreement, which mentions the mapping exercise on north-south co-operation. Will the Government commit to publishing that mapping exercise?

Greg Hands: The Government are undertaking analyses of so many different factors involved in this particular arrangement and question. We have always made clear our commitment to ensuring that the House is properly apprised of all the relevant facts when it comes to examine the actual withdrawal agreement in due course.

As we prepare the ground at the Department for International Trade, its Ministers have made more than 100 overseas visits in the past year and a half. We have set up 14 trade working groups, covering 21 countries with a substantial market size. None of that would have been possible without the excellent work of our Department for International Trade staff, both at home and in post in 108 countries around the world. I put on the record my thanks for their hard work, professionalism and invaluable expertise.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I have listened very carefully to what the Minister has said. Will he acknowledge that there are still very serious concerns about what needs to happen to preserve an invisible border on the island of Ireland—one that does not have any physical infrastructure—and that there is seemingly a misunderstanding in some parts about what is actually meant by the back-stop option of full alignment?

Greg Hands: We have been absolutely clear that we will of course abide by the December agreement in full. Let me remind the hon. Lady that the three priorities we laid out include a strong commitment to avoid a hard border, but also to preserve the integrity of the UK market—I remind her that having access to the UK market is very important for the people of Northern Ireland. No UK Prime Minister could accept a new border down the Irish sea.
able—crucially, outside the customs union—to pursue an independent trade policy and to secure those agreements with the rest of the world.

On what was said during the campaign, the Department for International Trade has the capability in place and we have built up the Department. I have mentioned the 14 trade working groups. We are clearly not able to carry out a trade negotiation while we are still members of the European Union, but the hon. Gentleman seems to be demanding that we have those negotiations while at the same time saying that we should stay in the EU, which would prevent us from having the negotiations in the first place.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, given the incredible depth and complexity of the UK’s trade with Europe, there is no off-the-shelf solution available from any other trade relationship? Does he also agree that, if we are to have as frictionless trade as possible, there clearly needs to be some form of agreement for what will happen at our customs, such as a partnership or another type of agreement?

**Greg Hands**: My hon. Friend is right on both counts. There is no off-the-shelf agreement that would be suitable in this case. We are clear that we are seeking a bespoke arrangement between the United Kingdom and the European Union. Neither something like the comprehensive economic and trade agreement nor something like the European economic area would be suitable. On co-operation, we are clear that we seek a good agreement with the European Union that creates as frictionless trade as possible across all our borders, not just the internal border on the island of Ireland.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): May I take the Minister back to the former permanent secretary? When Mr Donnelly was interviewed on the “Today” programme that morning, so keen were the presenters to get his soundbite about the packet of crisps, that they gave no analysis whatsoever of his figures, which were about 10% away from those issued by the national statistics office. Has the Department done any digging into where his figures came from?

**Greg Hands**: My right hon. Friend tempts me down a path which I think I ought to resist. I am not exactly sure what figures the former permanent secretary used, but the figures are clear: European Union trade is extremely important to this country, but it is none the less a declining part of our overall trade, down from 56% in 2006 to just 43% today.

**Anna Soubry** (Bromley) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

**Greg Hands**: I am going to make a bit of progress. We are not working purely on non-EU trade. A common misconception is that the DIT is a purely Brexit Department. Our ongoing work of encouraging investment and exports is equally important, and that applies just as much to trade with Europe as it does to trade outside it. DIT has over 300 staff across continental Europe. I myself have made 16 European visits to 10 countries while in this position, as have all our ministerial team, including the Secretary of State. We have brilliant teams in commercial centres right the way across Europe.

**Anna Soubry**: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. It is very good, kind and generous of him. May we just return to the comments made by Sir Martin Donnelly, because I do not think the record will be accurate? We have heard mention of a bag of crisps. What he said was that, based on his experience of 15 years and beyond in the specific area of trade, our country was in effect embarking on a course that was the equivalent of swapping a three-course meal for a bag of crisps. Has my right hon. Friend seen the Government’s own analysis of the various options available to us that show that, even if we get a trade deal with every single country with which we do not have one by virtue of our membership of the European Union, which is about 50, we will still not be as prosperous as we are now by virtue of our membership of the European Union?

**Greg Hands**: I thank my right hon. Friend for her lengthy intervention. What I would say is that there is no such analysis of the kind she describes. What I am clear on is that it is our objective to maintain frictionless trade with the European Union as we go forward. It is our objective to conduct an independent trade policy and to seek, when the time is right, trade agreements with those partners. It is also our objective to seek the continuity in existing EU trade agreements for the UK, which I note the Labour party voted against on Second Reading of the Trade Bill. Labour is actually opposed to us seeking the continuity of existing trade agreements.

**Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): Going back to the analysis published by the Government and the risk presented by non-tariff barriers, it was clear in that analysis that, even if we had an EEA-style agreement, there would still be damage to the UK economy. Is the Minister saying that he wants EEA-plus?

**Greg Hands**: I think I understand my hon. Friend’s intervention, but the Government have been clear for more than a year, since the Lancaster House speech, that our objective is not to seek an EEA-style agreement. Nor is it our objective to seek a CETA-style agreement. It is our objective to seek a deep and comprehensive agreement with the European Union, the like of which, I remind my hon. Friend, who I know studies these matters very carefully, was not modelled in those analyses. That is the most important point.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab) rose—

**Greg Hands**: I am going to make a bit of progress. I am going to give a few examples of our work around Europe. I promoted the UK’s defence industry in Sweden, visiting Saab, whose new generation Gripen fighter jet could be worth £1.1 billion to UK industry. I and my colleagues engaged with the Polish Government directly on behalf of UK companies to discuss high-value retail opportunities in the Czech Republic—in Czech, I might add, Madam Deputy Speaker. I and my colleagues from DIT and the Department for Exiting the European Union have addressed chambers of commerce right the way across the European Union—in Austria, Hungary and Bulgaria, among many others. I enjoyed making use of my language skills when I gave speeches in German to senior business leaders in Munich, Düsseldorf, Osnabrück, Tegernsee and so on.
Greg Hands: I will make a bit more progress. We are committed to ratifying the CETA agreement with Canada, which provisionally came into effect in September. I was delighted that we were joined by 86 Labour MPs—many of whom are in the Chamber at the moment—who, in defiance of their Front-Bench team, supported the EU’s trade agenda in making sure that CETA was passed. In defiance of the party Whip, they voted for that important agreement with Justin Trudeau’s Canada.

We are supportive of the EU’s work to sign third-country trade agreements in future, and I have attended four Trade Ministers’ Foreign Affairs Councils, which included discussion of these. The Commission has been particularly focusing on agreements with South America’s Mercosur union and with Mexico. We continue to support the ongoing negotiations for both free trade agreements. On Mexico, we would like to see progress made wherever possible in the negotiations, although we recognise the complexity of North American Free Trade Agreement renegotiations running in parallel. We will continue our support for EU-Mercosur trade negotiations and would like to emphasise the urgent need to progress the trade components. It is essential to keep momentum and to achieve a swift political agreement.

Another high-profile agreement is the EU-Japan economic partnership agreement, which the Commission is strongly pushing to fast-track, so that it can be signed during Japan’s Prime Minister Abe’s visit to Brussels in July 2018. As a champion of free trade, the UK has been one of the strongest advocates—actually, I believe the strongest advocate—of this EPA, and we warmly welcome the work of both sides to reach this agreement, which will support global prosperity. We continue to engage constructively on EU business and with our European partners, and we continue to push UK trade and investment to businesses on the European continent. It is important that our trade engagement includes our European neighbours, as well as to negotiate our own trade agreements around the world.

[Greg Hands]

DIT’s relationship with Europe does not just extend to export and investment promotion. The vote to leave the EU was not a vote to undermine the EU. It is very important to understand that it is in this country’s interest to have a strong and effective EU. We continue to engage constructively in ongoing EU trade policy, as we currently are a full and equal member of the EU. As the House heard on Monday, we are working closely with our European partners as well as bilaterally to respond to President Trump’s decision to impose tariffs on imported steel and aluminium.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: I will make a bit more progress. We are committed to ratifying the CETA agreement with Canada, which provisionally came into effect in September. I was delighted that we were joined by 86 Labour MPs—many of whom are in the Chamber at the moment—who, in defiance of their Front-Bench team, supported the EU’s trade agenda in making sure that CETA was passed. In defiance of the party Whip, they voted for that important agreement with Justin Trudeau’s Canada.

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Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): On frictionless trade, will the future be better than what we have now or worse?

Greg Hands: As I said, we are seeking a good, comprehensive, deep and wide trade partnership with the EU that is as frictionless as possible. That is why the right relationship is this deep, comprehensive and unique free trade agreement with Europe, based on the principles the Prime Minister set out throughout 2017 and in her speech a fortnight ago. We should oppose Labour’s latest Brexit policy of apparently keeping the UK in the, a, or perhaps any customs union with the EU. We want the greatest possible tariff and barrier-free trade with our European neighbours, as well as to negotiate our own trade agreements around the world.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): In the pursuit of this future relationship, will the Minister update the House on what progress has been made on the continuity of trading terms for our food and drink producers, especially in relation to the protected designation of origin and protected geographical indication schemes? Last week, the Secretary of State for Scotland guaranteed that there would be absolutely no change, but yesterday the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said that absolutely nothing could be guaranteed. Who is correct?

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: No, I will make a little more progress.

We have heard questions about why we would want a bespoke trade agreement rather than taking one off the shelf, which, the argument goes, would involve easier negotiation. I remind the House of the Government’s reasons for choosing this approach over existing models, such as the EEA or CETA, and why whatever model we choose must involve leaving the customs union. A Norway-style deal might seem superficially attractive, but we would be subject to any new rules that the Commission chose to enact, automatically and in their entirety, with no endpoint. Most importantly, we would have little influence over those rules and no vote, which would be too much of a loss of democratic control, and also no guarantee—far from it—that whatever the EU27 did would also be in the interests of UK businesses and consumers.

Nor should we look to a Canadian-style agreement for the answer. Even if it were easier to achieve a CETA-style deal, we start from a unique position of regulatory alignment with the EU. Unlike other countries, we start from the position that our systems are already the same. It is precisely because the Government recognise how important EU trade is that we must look to an ambitious deal, rather than starting our relationship from scratch with something like CETA.
As important as trade with the EU is, however, we must also look outside Europe. The IMF—this statistic is also on the Commission’s website—estimates that over the next decade or so, 90% of global growth will come from beyond the EU. China adds an economy the size of Switzerland every year. There will be over 1 billion middle-class African consumers in 2060, and Commonwealth GDP is predicted to hit $13 trillion in two years. These represent unprecedented opportunities, yet they are harder to reach from behind the EU’s customs wall. Only once we can sign our own independent trade deals can we take full advantage of them.

Signing those deals means being outside the customs union. We need look only to Turkey to see that being in the customs union, in whole or in part, can sometimes be the worst of all worlds.

Several hon. Members rose—

Greg Hands: I want to make progress—it is very important that Members understand the point that I am making.

The EU is currently negotiating a deal with Japan. If it finalises that deal, of which, as I say, we are strongly supportive, Turkey will need to reduce tariffs on Japanese imports, but it will not get reciprocal access to the Japanese market. It will have to negotiate its own access, but those negotiations will be more difficult because Turkey will already have reduced its own tariffs and therefore will not have as much to give in return. As the Prime Minister has set out repeatedly, we are looking for a bespoke agreement. For goods, this will be based on a comprehensive system of mutual recognition, so that products need be approved only once. On services, we have an opportunity to establish a broader agreement than ever before.

Anna Soubry: My right hon. Friend is being very kind and generous in giving way, especially as I am really not helping him. With the greatest respect, he knows, as everyone else does, that we will and can achieve all these deals with countries such as China as a member of the EU. By way of example, I have met the Australian ambassador, and while he would of course want to do a trade deal with our great country, Australia will look first to do a trade deal with the EU, with its 500 million customers. Is it not important that we make all these things very clear to the British people? We do trade deals at the moment by virtue of our membership of the EU; and the only reason why we are leaving the customs union is to chase unicorn deals, but we can get deals with the EU.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It was quite in order for the Minister to give way to the right hon. Lady, but she knows that her intervention was too long, because she said so the last time—I heard her.

Greg Hands: It was a long intervention, Madam Deputy Speaker.

With all due respect to my right hon. Friend—she and I served alongside each other in government—the British people have made the decision to leave the European Union. That was the crucial decision made in June 2016. The Government’s purpose is now to ensure that we have the best possible frictionless trade deal with the European Union, while still being able to take advantage of trade opportunities beyond the EU. As I have stated repeatedly during this debate, that is the Government’s objective.

Stewart Hosie: Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: No. I have already used up 25 minutes, and I am going to make a little more progress.

On services, we have the opportunity to establish a broader agreement than ever before. Of course we recognise that we cannot have the rights of single market membership, such as passporting for financial services, just as we understand that we cannot have all the benefits of single market membership without the obligations, but that does not mean that we should be shackled by existing precedent.

I know that some Members will ask how we can be sure that the EU will agree to our approach. The main point to bear in mind is that it is strongly in EU countries’ interests—economic and otherwise—to sign and agree such a deal. On the day we leave, the United Kingdom will overnight become the EU’s second largest trading partner—larger than China, Japan or India. The Commission estimates trade between the UK and the EU27 to be worth €812 billion. That is only 8% behind the EU27’s main trading partner, the United States, but it is 60% more than with China, which comes third.

Given the effort that the EU has put into deals with the likes of Mexico, Vietnam and Singapore—all of which, crucially, we support, but each of which is significantly less important to the EU than ours—it would be odd indeed for it to reject proposals from us. Furthermore, both the EU and the UK need to send a loud and clear message that we are strong believers in free trade. What message would be sent if we could not reach a free trade agreement?

However, even that underestimates our importance to the EU, because it is the type of trade that matters, not just the volume. Our strongest comparative advantages are in the business, professional and financial services that other businesses need to grow, and in the pharmaceutical goods that no one wants to exclude. The rest of the network could try and pick up the slack—the Frankfurts or Paris—but as I know, because I have worked in the sector, that network has less capacity and is less efficient, and EU businesses and manufacturers could not connect with the capital market that they need. The EU talks about a capital markets union, but how tenable is that without access to Europe’s main capital market?

Our relationship goes beyond mutual economic interest, however. Our membership of the EU is only one part of our relationship with Europe. We can still be neighbours when we leave: we are 30 km from the coast of France. We have cultural ties from before the EU was founded. We will still be in the same core organisations that the EU or its members are part of, from the European Court of Human Rights to the UN to NATO, and from the International Monetary Fund to the World Trade Organisation—the economic, security and humanitarian firmament that holds the international system together.
Vicky Ford: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Greg Hands: No. I am about to finish.

Nevertheless, the Department for International Trade is preparing this country for life outside the EU. We are proceeding with trade and customs Bills that will give us a functioning customs regime on day one. As one would expect, they have been designed to prepare for every eventuality, although they will be needed regardless of the outcome of our negotiations with the EU. They will give us a strong trade remedies regime. Free trade does not mean trade without rules, but Labour opposed these new powers when they were considered on Second Reading. Our independent trade remedies regime will allow us to protect UK industry from unfair dumping or subsidy, while balancing its interests against the interests of UK consumers and other UK businesses. It will deliver through, while independent trade remedies authority, so that businesses have the confidence they need that it will be impartial and will not act against the interests of wider industry. I want to make sure that this new regime works as well for business as it should from the start. We are consulting on which existing EU trade remedies we should carry over, and I encourage any business with an interest to respond before the consultation closes at the end of this month, and any Members with producer or consumer interests to help to publicise this.

The Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill will also allow us to create a UK unilateral trade preferences regime for developing countries. Shockingly, this was also opposed by Labour, the Scottish National party and the Liberal Democrats on Second Reading. The UK is a proud advocate of supporting developing countries to reduce poverty through trade, and I hope that Labour will reconsider its stance. This Bill will let us continue the UK’s existing system of preferential access for developing countries, which reduces or removes import tariffs from a number of countries, while also allowing us to explore improvements on the EU’s current system.

Leaving the European Union will allow us to negotiate trade deals across the world, but at the same time, this Government understand the importance of EU trade. That is why we seek a deep and special partnership with the EU. This is the only appropriate option. Members of all parties should be optimistic that that can be achieved.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the Opposition spokesman, let me say that while it is clear that a great many Members wish to speak, we have limited time, so there will be an initial time limit of eight minutes on Back-Bench speeches, which is likely to reduce. I make this announcement so that Members can tailor their speeches accordingly.

4.6 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It was a year ago yesterday that this House voted overwhelmingly to give the Prime Minister the authority to trigger article 50. It is almost a year since she did so and nearly 20 months since the referendum result that set that process in train. The Government accepted the EU timetable, and while the cut-off point might ultimately slip by a week or even two, the draft withdrawal agreement, including the framework for the future relationship, will have to be wrapped up in just seven months’ time.

We welcome the joint report published in December last year and the progress it represented, but the fact remains that the Government are running out of time and of road, so, frankly, it is extraordinary that, despite the scale of the legislative task confronting us between now and exit day, the Government have decided that the best use of our time is two days of general debate on European affairs without even the possibility of a vote.

While we welcome any and every chance to debate Brexit and Europe, this is a farcical situation. No date has been set for the Report stage of either the Customs Bill or the trade Bill, as the Government rightly fear a possible defeat. The immigration Bill we are now told will hopefully be with us before Christmas, a year after it was initially expected, but as the Home Secretary has made clear, it might not even be law by the day we leave. And there is absolutely no sign of the fisheries or agriculture Bills, or, for that matter, anything that could reasonably be described as a domestic legislative agenda. As Philip Cowley, professor of politics at Queen Mary University of London has said:

“This is an approach to parliamentary democracy known to procedural experts as: Run Away.”

The reason for this legislative paralysis is obvious: the Conservative party remains bitterly divided over how to implement Brexit and what the future relationship with the EU27 should be.

Anna Soubry: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me, and I am going to be honest about all this: that there is some division on these Benches, but, equally, there is division still on the hon. Gentleman’s Benches? While the move to a customs union has been welcomed, does he anticipate that we might see more movement to the customs union and of course to accepting that the single market would also be a good way to settle it?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention. We do need to be honest about this. An issue of this magnitude and importance is bound to create different views in all parties, but I would argue that the divisions on the Labour Benches are nothing like the fundamental divisions in the Cabinet and on the Government Benches. Certainly, the divisions on our side are not preventing legislation from being brought forward for us to vote on.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I just want to make a bit of progress, if that is okay.

The Prime Minister’s Mansion House speech on 2 March was as much an attempt to muzzle those divisions as it was to provide clarity on the Government’s vision of the end-state relationship. To be fair, it was a more serious and detailed speech than those that had gone before, and it was pleasingly devoid of empty sloganeering. There was no repeat of earlier banalities such as “Brexit means Brexit” or “a red, white and blue Brexit”. At last, we heard a speech that started to engage with many of the hard truths about our departure from the EU. It stressed the need for compromise on all sides and conceded that inevitable trade-offs would have to be made if we were to avoid the hardest and most damaging of departures. As with her Florence speech last year, one wished that that content could have been
delivered far earlier in the process. Had it been, I suspect that the country would have been in a better position today.

Judging by the raft of tortuous cherry and cake metaphors that we heard from the Government Benches in response to the Prime Minister’s statement on Monday, she might have succeeded in her immediate objective of holding together her deeply divided Government and party and in giving herself a small degree of room to manoeuvre in the months ahead. However, it is patently obvious that those divisions remain as deep as ever.

That is blindingly obvious. If they had been healed, we would now be considering the Report stage of the Customs Bill or the trade Bill, rather than having a general debate such as this. Make no mistake, those divisions will have to be confronted, and the sensible majority in this House will have to be given the opportunity to shape the Brexit process sooner rather than later, not least because, although the Prime Minister’s speech was more realistic in important ways, it was still not realistic enough.

Emma Reynolds: One of the things that the Prime Minister said in her speech was that we will inevitably have less access as a result of the hard Brexit that the Government are pursuing. Does my hon. Friend agree that less access to our biggest market will mean fewer jobs, less investment and less economic growth?

Matthew Pennycook: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I could not have put it better myself.

The theme of today’s debate is international trade. The sections relating to customs were arguably the least convincing parts of the Prime Minister’s speech. In contrast to other areas, there was no attempt to engage with the hard truths about what leaving the customs union will mean for the UK, and particularly with the impact of that decision on manufacturing and the Irish border. As the House knows, the Prime Minister simply went back to the two propositions that the Government set out in their future partnership paper published on 15 August last year. They were a “customs partnership between the UK and the EU” or “a highly streamlined customs arrangement, where we”—that is, the UK—“would jointly agree to implement a range of measures to minimise frictions to trade, together with specific provisions for Northern Ireland.”

The first proposition is untried and untested. By the Government’s own admission, it would take at least five years to implement and it would be ripe for abuse. It was roundly rejected by the EU last year, not least because it would require EU member states to completely reconfigure their own national customs systems. The idea is not simply “blue sky thinking”, as the Secretary of State described it in September last year; it is pie-in-the-sky thinking.

The second option would, according to the chief executive of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, take three years to put in place and would result in friction on our borders. It would therefore require a range of measures, including unproven “technology-based solutions”, to minimise frictions to trade. In her speech, the Prime Minister claimed that both those options were serious and merited consideration, but they were widely dismissed in the wake of that speech. The EU immediately ruled them out as non-starters.

The truth is that the Government have absolutely no idea about what to do about the issue of customs and the Irish border. The fall-back that surfaced in the EU Commission’s draft legal text published on 28 February—namely, that Northern Ireland should go into a customs union with the south and that the UK border should be shifted to somewhere in the Irish sea—is clearly unacceptable. The Prime Minister quite rightly made it clear that no UK Prime Minister could accept such an outcome. The Irish border issue remains unresolved.

One part of a wider solution to the border issue would be, as the Opposition have suggested, to negotiate a new comprehensive UK-EU customs union. Such a customs union would ensure that goods covered by the agreement could still be traded with the EU tariff free, with no new customs or rules of origin checks. The exact terms of such a customs union would, of course, have to be negotiated, but this represents a pragmatic proposal, reflecting current arrangements, and it has been welcomed by trade unions and by business, including the Manufacturers Organisation—formerly the EEF—and the CBI. It would be a win-win for both the UK and the EU27. A new UK-EU customs union would not prevent the UK from trading globally or improving our export industry, just as the EU customs union has not stopped Germany making China its largest trading partner, for example. Germany now exports four times more to China than the UK. The UK would still be free, as we are now, to negotiate in the areas of services, data, investment, procurement and intellectual property, and UK businesses would still be able to export to non-EU markets just as other EU countries do. In short, there is no question but that the UK could and would still increase trade inside a customs union with the EU, as the Secretary of State for International Trade said earlier this year in relation to the Prime Minister’s visit to China.

A new, comprehensive UK-EU customs union, were it agreed, would of course require the UK to adopt a common external tariff with the EU, and we would of course seek both to replicate existing EU trade agreements and benefit from negotiated future deals. It is true that we would not be able to negotiate independent third-party trade deals, but as many hon. Members have already mentioned, we need to face up to some hard facts in this area, because the notion that future free trade agreements will offset the inevitable economic costs of exiting a customs union with the EU is nonsense. To say, as the Minister did, that it is simply not an either/or question does not get to the heart of the issue that confronts us.

Vicky Ford: When the hon. Gentleman says that he wants to stay in a customs union with the EU, will he confirm that he will continue to comply with EU state aid and competition law as a condition of staying in that customs union? I cannot find a single example of a country that can stay in the customs union while disregarding state aid laws.

Matthew Pennycook: The hon. Lady has great expertise in this area, but I think she has slightly misjudged the fact, as I understand it, that that is not about customs, but about the elements that make up the single market. We have said that we would seek, in principle, to negotiate...
[Matthew Pennycook]

protections, clarifications or exemptions where necessary, but I cannot imagine a situation in which those exemptions would be necessary. As I think the Leader of the Opposition said on “Peston on Sunday” some time ago, there is nothing in the current state aid rules that would prevent us from implementing, for example, our manifesto.

Many hon. Members have already mentioned this, but Sir Martin Donnelly, the former permanent secretary at the Department for International Trade, said that the reality is that what the Government are proposing is akin to giving up “a three-course meal... for the promise of a packet of crisps in the future”.

The EU currently constitutes 44% of our exports and 53% of our imports. It must be our priority. Increases in trade from new free trade agreements with the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand combined would be worth less than 3% of our current trade in goods and services.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I will make a bit of progress. FTAs with the BRIC countries would be worth just over 2%. Any such trade deals, even if they could be secured reasonably quickly, would in all likelihood also involve detrimental trade-offs and compromises in standards and regulations with which the British public would rightly take issue.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): On that point about regulation, the Government’s leaked cross-Whitehall EU exit analysis paper outlines the regulatory opportunities of Brexit and states:

“A cross-Whitehall work-stream is working through these opportunities.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that that is code for deregulation and the ripping up of our workplace environment rights? The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is already unable to give us any clarification about the European Environment Agency. Is this not just a bonfire of our rights?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend. That is certainly the fear. I read the same analysis as he did—I had to surrender my phone to do so and then found that it had been released publicly a week later—and it does say in several places that there are opportunities to deregulate. Perhaps the Minister can tell us why those things are being modelled and to what they might refer.

One has only to listen to the noises coming from the United States Government on issues ranging from the replacement of the EU-US open skies treaty to the inclusion of agriculture in any FTA to get a sense of how difficult things will be even when it comes to new deals with some of our closest allies, and that is irrespective of who occupies the White House. The prospect of new free trade agreements might give the International Trade Secretary a purpose, but they would be good for little else.

Mark Garnier: I want to go back to the comments that the hon. Gentleman made about Sir Martin Donnelly, whom I worked with for a number of months; he is a civil servant of extreme ability and wisdom. When he made the banquet versus the packet of crisps analogy, I think he was looking to a certain extent at some of those simple gravity models used by the Treasury—the simple mathematical trade-off between tariffs with the EU and tariffs elsewhere.

What is missed in all this debate is the ability of the UK to find itself at the centre of a network of trade deals. For example, a US manufacturer might see the advantage in moving its manufacturing operations to the UK to take advantage of a UK-India deal, for example, if the trade relationship between the UK and India was greater and better than that between America and India directly. That is the unknown that we are struggling to analyse, to get the true comparison between one type of relationship and the other.

Matthew Pennycook: I simply do not think that that stacks up. I listened to Sir Martin’s comments very carefully, and I am not sure that he was referring to that. However, if the hon. Gentleman makes a speech, I will be personally interested in hearing his points.

Emma Reynolds: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I am going to make progress, as lots of people want to speak.

A sensible, pragmatic Government focused on the economic interests of the country would adjust their policy accordingly and consider the option of a new, comprehensive customs union along the lines that Labour has suggested. Importantly, so would any Government committed, as this Government are under the terms of the phase 1 agreement, to the avoidance of a hard border on the island of Ireland, including any physical infrastructure or related checks and controls—a border that is frictionless, not as frictionless as possible. Let us be clear: a border that has checks, even “very, very minimal” checks, as the Foreign Secretary suggested to a business audience last week, is still a border that would require some kind of infrastructure and patrols.

A version of the Canada-US border, which the Prime Minister suggested was being explored, is simply not good enough. The threat that such an outcome would pose to the politics, security and economy of the island of Ireland, as well as to the daily lives of citizens on both sides of the border, are obvious to most hon. Members.

We recognise that a new, comprehensive customs union, in itself, is not a complete solution to the Irish border issue. To obviate the need for physical infrastructure on and checks at that border and to uphold the Good Friday agreement in its entirety, in all three strands, full regulatory alignment in relation to all goods production and trade would be required. That alignment would, of course, have to be maintained over time as EU legislation evolved.

That is one of the reasons why we need to secure a new agreement that gives us the closest possible relationship with the single market: full access to European markets; no new impediments to trade; no drop in the rights, standards and protections built up over our 43 years as an EU member state; and no prospect of falling behind them in the future. We must recognise that our future economic relationship depends on maintaining a level playing field and the same standards that business wants.
But when it comes to goods, a conversation with the EU27 about full regulatory alignment, and the institutional mechanisms that might be required to facilitate such alignment, is not even possible when the Government have ruled out membership of a customs union. The idea that “a comprehensive system of mutual recognition” is an alternative solution—something that EU member states do not even expect of each other—is mistaken. There is no solution to the Irish border issue that does not involve some form of customs union. That is why the Government must reconsider their red line in this area. If they do not, it will be difficult to see what their solution to the Irish border issue—or, indeed, the issue of a customs border at Dover—might be. That matters because, although the Government may be able to fudge some of the difficult decisions for now, the issue of the Irish border issue can no longer be fudged.

Caroline Lucas: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I am just coming to a close.

The draft withdrawal agreement merely needs to include a political declaration on the future relationship—that is, its broad outlines—with the details to be hammered out after the UK has left the EU.

Vicky Ford rose—

Matthew Pennycook: I will not give way.

But the Irish border issue is an integral part of the withdrawal agreement. Without a solution to it, it is very difficult to imagine how the Government secure an orderly exit deal or a transition period, let alone a post-Brexit trade deal.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We now have a time limit of eight minutes.

4.24 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I am pleased to speak in today’s general debate and talk a little about my views as we move towards phase 3, with a specific focus on the pensions, asset management and long-term savings industries and our future trade in those services.

Some 24% of people employed in the UK in the general insurance, life assurance and pensions sector work in Scotland—many in my constituency of East Renfrewshire, due to its access to the Glasgow financial district and the central belt as a whole, as well as the easy links down to London. These industries want a deal. Why? It is because no deal means that banks, insurance companies and fund managers could not provide services across the UK from the EU. Contracts, particularly for derivatives, which run over exit day could simply become unenforceable. Business liability insurance contracts often stretch decades ahead. Insurers could, as a result of a no-deal Brexit, lose their licence to do insurance in the customer’s jurisdiction. Cross-border pension payments from the UK into the EU and vice versa simply could not be paid. It would defy common sense not to have a Brexit deal on financial services, given that the insurance and long-term savings sectors are so largely aligned and integrated, and our trade in services is vital to both parties.

The UK’s asset management industry is the second largest in the world, managing nearly £7 trillion-worth of assets, serving a global client base. Similarly, numerous investment funds used by pension providers are set up under Irish law or other EU-based jurisdictions. More than 150 UK managers are managing Irish funds right now, with more than 2,000 Irish-domiciled funds sold in the UK. That is more than €600 billion in fund assets managed by UK managers in Ireland on behalf of UK investors.

The Association of British Insurers said last summer that a no-deal Brexit is “unacceptable”. The Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association was even more blunt when it said:

“WTO-only would cause major disruption. On no account could the pension fund industry support a regime based only on WTO rules. This would be likely to cause economic harm, create regulatory barriers and undermine essential pensions support services.”

That was why the industry welcomed the Mansion House speech. Clarification and honesty of the reality of what we are confronting allows people to move forward. If we leave the single market, passporting, which is a central pillar of the EU financial services regime, will end. Currently, there are 336,421 passports held by UK firms, and many firms hold multiple passports for multiple member states. The London Market Group recently published figures suggesting that the UK insurance sector takes in £14 billion a year of business connected with the EU.

That clarity was needed. Now we need to start talking about successor arrangements, with the transitional period being a time for firms to adapt to changes in the marketplace and regulatory structures. A primary risk for institutions that access EU markets from the UK is the post-Brexit loss of that access on a short-term or longer-term basis, because no equivalence decision has been issued in time. A lack of agreement on equivalence would also affect elements of financial services infrastructure, such as access to clearing houses or payment services, or the provision of custody services to certain clients.

Bottoming out that equivalence process for the UK and third country must be a priority. If we want to maintain and enhance this country’s position as the leading global financial centre, we will need to be regulated in accordance with the highest global standards. That is important for not just UK firms, but third-country institutions, such as those based in the US or Hong Kong, which cannot make use of the passport system and must establish an authorised presence in an EU member state. For this reason, many third-country institutions have chosen to base themselves in London through a UK subsidiary as their primary point of access to EU markets through passporting, and we want them to be able to continue to do so.

We also need to agree successor arrangements for passporting of deposit taking and lending business under the capital requirements directive and the alternative investment fund managers directive. Third-country recognition is absolutely vital, and the process for that needs to have been sorted out long before we have left. UCITS—undertakings for the collective investment of transferable securities—are required to have their management companies established in an EU member state, so a bespoke mutual recognition agreement that would allow UK entities to continue fulfil their UCITS roles will be necessary.
Pension schemes are subject to EU legislation, both as institutional investors affected by EU financial market regulation, such as MiFID II—the markets in financial instruments directive—and the European market infrastructure regulation on the derivatives market, and, significantly, directly under the directive on institutions for occupational retirement provision, on workplace pension schemes. IORP II is due to be implemented in the UK by January 2019.

During the negotiation of IORP II, the UK was successful in warding off the threat of an EU solvency regime for pensions, which could have resulted in a bill for British business of up to €650 billion. This remains on the agenda of EIOPA—the European Insurance and Occupational Pensions Authority—which is the EU-level pensions regulatory body. Everyone knows I would like the maximum possible access to the single market, but it is essential that any future moves by the EU to propose a new EU solvency regime should not apply to defined-benefit schemes in the UK. The absolute worst case scenario for UK pension schemes would be to find themselves more vulnerable outside the EU to the damaging regulation that was successfully blocked when the UK was inside the EU.

More broadly, a good trade deal is vital to the pensions industry because of the significance to employers that sponsor pension schemes across the manufacturing sector. A bad Brexit will have huge detrimental economic impacts on those sectors, which would put huge pressure on those employers’ ability to fund their schemes. Pension schemes need full access to the global financial markets, both for investments that will give them the resources to meet their pension commitments and for de-risking and hedging purposes so that they can manage their risks. We need the UK financial services industry to remain as strong and vibrant as it is today.

I have spoken in two Westminster Hall debates recently: one on the European Free Trade Association and one on alternatives to a no-deal Brexit. I shall not repeat what I said there, but I remain of the view that EFTA-EEA membership finds a neat balance by reflecting that the EU referendum result, although decisive, was not overwhelming. Is it a perfect option? No. I want that bespoke deal and believe and trust in the Prime Minister over ideology, and optimism that is merited solutions to be put forward in the national interest, what they want, and what they need, are practical, workable pragmaticism over ideology, and optimism that is merited but grounded in reality. That is why the Prime Minister’s Mansion House speech was so welcome. This is a negotiation, but I hope that the EU will engage with the suggestions constructively and that we will be able, at long last, to move forward at pace.

Several hon. Members rose—
educational experience through some of the research that has been done by EU nationals and through Horizon 2020.

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Gentleman is making a compelling speech. Does he agree that it is extraordinary to see a Government so proudly leading the country into a situation in which we will all be so much poorer, not just economically but in the terms he describes—the richness of our relationships with other EU countries in our research establishments and elsewhere, which are so important? It is young people whose futures are being closed down in a most unforgivable way.

Stephen Gethins: As usual, the hon. Lady makes an excellent and powerful point, and Government Members would do well to listen to her—in fact, the hon. Member beside her might do well to do so too sometimes. I will come on to the finances that she rightly raises, but before I do I want to talk about the broader impact on public services in areas such as access to the single market, which is so important in decreasing red tape. We often hear about red tape, but access to the single market has reduced red tape, not least for our SMEs. I have mentioned seasonal workers, but we must also think about the impact on services and on our doctors, nurses and dentists who enjoy freedom of movement and come from throughout the European Union. It can be difficult to get a dentist and my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) often mentions the practice in his constituency that is made up of several EU nationals.

The single market makes us more competitive. I just mentioned the benefits of Horizon 2020, and the European Medicines Agency is also important—it is based in London, but it is due to be taken away, taking jobs with it.

Another issue is cash for public services, as the hon. Lady just mentioned. The UK Government talk about finding common ground between themselves and the Scottish Government. There is one area of common ground between them—the Minister is right to look up at that point. They agree in their analysis that leaving the EU will be devastating for the economies of both Scotland and the United Kingdom. The Scottish Government’s figures—we were told that they were not right until the UK Government’s figures suddenly came out and agreed with them—showed that the hit on our GDP will be devastating in every single scenario set out. Every 1% reduction in GDP could hit tax by £8 billion, but that does not even start to address the amount of money that we will have to shell out just to leave the European Union, reported to be £40 billion. The Chancellor is preparing to leave with initial costs—initial—of £3 billion. The Financial Times estimates that Brexit has already cost the UK economy £18 billion, or about £350 million a week. I am not sure where we have heard that figure before.

If we have lower GDP and less money from the tax take, we will have less money to spend on public services—that is a basic fact. In Scotland, the Scottish Government have made changes in tax so that the majority are no worse off or better off, but that will raise an additional £164 million. That is welcome, but it is only a drop in the ocean of the money that we will need to try to save our public services from the hits that will come their way. If anyone could tell me how they will plug the gap in public services that will be caused, I would be delighted to hear from them. Would anybody like to make an intervention? I did not think so. Nobody has a clue—

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): The whole premise of what the hon. Gentleman is saying is based on figures that do not take into account at all of what the Prime Minister has set out to achieve, which is a special and deep partnership with the European Union. The figures that he quotes are the same figures that Scottish National party Members campaigned on during the referendum, when they predicted that there would be a recession and that the economy would fall off a cliff. They were false prophets then and they are false prophets now.

Stephen Gethins: I salute the hon. Gentleman’s courage in bringing that up, but I am actually using his own Government’s figures.

Christian Matheson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Antoinette Sandbach: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: I would like to make a little bit of progress, but I will come to the hon. Members in just a moment.

I am using this Government’s figures. We need to have a real and proper debate about how we plug the gaps in tax and in GDP.

Christian Matheson: The hon. Gentleman has obviously gone through a methodical process of working out the effect of Brexit on GDP. Has he worked out the effect on GDP of an empty Tory slogan?

Stephen Gethins: Well, we have worked out the impact on the NHS and on education, and that will be devastating to our public services because of the empty promises that each and every one of us will pay for.

Stewart Hosie: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Stephen Gethins: I will just make a little bit of progress.

I say gently to Government Members that there are serious issues around tax raised and GDP that we must all wrestle with in a serious manner, offering some suggestions, but right now the Government are not handling some of the big issues of the day. Time that is being taken up with this issue is strangling political debate. The strikes in our universities right now are crucial for all parties and we should all take them seriously; yet, as we look to a fair solution, this matter cannot be a priority because this Government are so consumed by Brexit and what is going on with leaving the European Union that other issues simply get ignored. Brexit strangles that proper and serious debate.

Antoinette Sandbach: I do not want the impression to be given to this House that the recent figures published by the Exiting the European Union Committee were the same as the figures that were used pre-referendum. Two totally different economic models were used. It would be wrong for the record of this House to suggest that the figures used before the referendum were the same as the ones after.
Stephen Gethins: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I note the differences that I sometimes have with her, but she makes an honest point. I note the correction to those Members on her Benches who have been avoiding the figures from their own Government.

I welcome the remarks of the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) on the customs union, and I hope that he will go to the next step on the single market. I particularly note and am grateful for his remarks on Northern Ireland, because Northern Ireland is one area that has been overlooked. The danger to the peace process is not something that any of us should take lightly, regardless of the views of different Members across this House. We have to take it seriously.

I know that my hon. Friends will talk about the continuity Bill in Holyrood, where we find the Conservatives utterly isolated in their latest power grab. When challenged, they say that we have to choose between the UK and the EU. That is nonsense and highlights the utter isolationism that sits at the hearts of many—not all—Government Members who reach out for this “ourselves alone” approach.

We need to start looking at where we can make progress. I have seen one silver lining in this House, for which I pay credit to Members from across the parties. I am seeing—from my short experience, I will admit—Members from across the House seeking to work together better than they have done before. It is not always easy, but Members are trying to put their differences aside and to find a way through. I salute a number of Members who have been able to do this.

Let me offer my own suggestion. Scotland voted to remain part of the European Union, as has been noted by Members in this House and by Members of Parliament from across the European Union. I suggest that bridges need to be built with our European partners economically. Whether we like it or not, this has been a shock to the system. It is really important. We need to build our economic ties. We would like to see support for immigration. If we can keep the Environment Secretary to his promises and to other Governments. This will be a good start. Scotland voted to remain in the EU. What they actually voted for was for the UK to remain in the EU, which is a totally different question. They did not vote for an independent Scotland to be in the EU.

In fact, as I have said in this House before, a majority in my constituency voted for the UK to leave the European Union. This information is based on research conducted by the University of East Anglia that broke down the Scottish vote in the EU referendum by Westminster constituency boundaries and found that 54% of voters in my constituency voted leave. Of course, this should come as no surprise when one considers that my constituency is home to several large fishing communities and active ports. About 35% of the UK’s white fish landings come in through the towns of Peterhead, Fraserburgh and Macduff in my constituency.

A University of Aberdeen study conducted ahead of the EU referendum found that 92% of British fishermen planned to vote leave. The study was of fishermen across the UK, but 68% of the sample was made up of Scottish fishermen. Fishing communities around the whole UK have suffered for decades under the common fisheries policy, and this is a historic wrong that must be put right. We owe it to all our fishing communities to make a success of our post-Brexit fisheries management.

When we leave the EU, we leave the common fisheries policy and become an independent coastal state. We must not weaken our hand in future annual coastal state negotiations by bargaining away access to our exclusive economic zone as part of a longer-term trade deal with the EU. With regard to reciprocal access, it is worth noting that compared with the 100,000 tonnes of fish caught in EU waters by UK vessels, the amount caught by EU vessels in UK waters is 700,000 tonnes. British fishermen catch only 40% of fish in UK waters, compared with 84% by Norwegian vessels in their waters and 95% by Icelandic vessels in theirs.

It is not just the fishermen who want us to leave the EU. A survey in The Scottish Farmer found that two thirds of Scottish farmers said they had voted to leave the EU. The National Farmers Union of Scotland believes the result to have been closer to 50:50, but it cannot be denied that a great many Scottish farmers will be glad to see the back of the EU and the common agricultural policy. A single common agricultural policy that was designed to work in a common way from the Arctic circle in the north all the way down to the Mediterranean led to an over-complicated, bureaucratic, “one size fits none” system. Scotland’s food and drink industry is too important to neglect. Globally renowned Scotch salmon and whisky are not just important to the Scottish economy but among the UK’s top exports.

I am very encouraged by the UK Government’s commitment to deliver the same level of farm support until the end of this Parliament. I know that many members of the seafood processing community would like to know whether something similar can be done to match the funding that currently comes from the European maritime and fisheries fund.

As other hon. Members have said, one impact of Brexit where there is concern from farmers and fishermen, particularly those in the food processing business, is the ability to supplement their workforce with workers from inside and outside the European Union on a level playing field. In the long term, these industries must be made sustainable with local labour, but that is not going...
to happen overnight, and in the interim period we will need a stopgap to ensure that the industry can continue to function. This was already an issue before Brexit, as there is not an infinite supply of EU labour for these industries. What is crucial, though, is that after we leave the EU we will take back control of our borders, our laws, our money and our waters.

4.49 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I apologise for not being able to be present for the conclusion of the debate tomorrow.

We should be very grateful that we have the opportunity over two days to discuss European affairs, but it is a reminder that there is one thing Ministers do not want us to be doing, which is voting on any amendments to keep us in a customs union. This is definitely going to be remembered as the Brexit Parliament. It is undoubtedly the Back Benchers’ Parliament. At the moment, it is running the risk of becoming the voteless Parliament, because business managers are scrambling around to fill the time with anything other than votes on important matters. Ministers are not going to be able to put those votes off permanently.

One of the reasons that there is so much support for the idea of remaining in a customs union was alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) in his excellent opening speech, and that is that it would provide part of the solution to the problem of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, which continues to rumble unresolved under the surface of the Brexit negotiations.

The truth is that the House divides into two camps on the subject of the border. There is one view that says, “It’s all right,” because there will be a technological solution that will get around the incompatibility between the policy the Government have adopted, with the very high bar they have rightly set of no checks, no infrastructure and an open border, and their determination to leave the single market and the customs union at the same time. The second view, which I share, is that we cannot currently see how those two contradictions can be resolved.

We have been taking evidence in the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union and looking at free trade agreements all over the world. Every single one of them—every single one—involves some checks on some goods. It does not matter whether it is Norway and Sweden or Canada and the United States of America. Even the much quoted but clearly little read by its proponents European Parliament report “Smart Border 2.0” acknowledges that, even with the most up-to-date technology, there would still need to be physical infrastructure, which is not compatible with maintaining an open border. Of course, the Government published their two documents last summer and we should explore all the options. I recognise that the suspension of belief is essential to the magician’s art, but it is not a very sound foundation for Government policy.

Although we are none the wiser about what is going to happen in Northern Ireland, we did learn, in fairness, a bit more about the Prime Minister’s approach in her Mansion House speech. Despite all the advance briefing about ambitious managed divergence, which I hope has now disappeared into the dustbin of history, the Prime Minister did speak a great deal about maintaining regulatory alignment. I welcome that.

The other thing that was striking about that speech was the frankness with which the Prime Minister acknowledged that we will inevitably have less access to our most important market, compared with what we have at the moment. It has taken a long time to get to this point of realism. Who remembers “We’re going to get the exact same benefits,” which was the Secretary of State’s cry for many months?

The truth—that we are going to have less access—is the reason why the pound fell after the referendum. It is why the UK has gone from being one of the fastest growing of the world’s advanced economies to the slowest, which has just been confirmed. The question remains for the House: what is the right approach to manage the risks of damage to the British economy as the process unfolds?

I think we all agree that continuing tariff-free trade is essential, and I simply say that the most effective way of achieving that would be to remain in a customs union with the European Union. We have heard from the Minister that 43% or 44% of our exports go to this market, and a further 17% go to countries with which we have trade agreements. It would be great if, in responding today, the Minister could confirm how the Government are getting on with ensuring that those agreements will roll over during the transitional period, so that businesses know the terms on which they will trade.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has touched on the issue of businesses. Companies such as Jaguar Land Rover in my constituency do not know where they are in relation to regulation of research and development, and there is nothing forthcoming from the Government on that.

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is one of a whole host of examples that Members on both sides of the House are aware of. Businesses in our constituencies are asking how it is going to work, because at the moment we do not know.

Staying in a customs union is what the CBI wants, and I am afraid that the Government’s policy on international trade is one of Micawberism. Given the fondness of the President of the United States for punitive tariffs and the clear desire of the American Administration to open up our agricultural market, which is not what the Environment Secretary said he wants, do we really think that concluding a trade agreement with the US is going to happen any time soon? Do we really think we are going to get a trade deal with India before we have agreed to give more visas to its citizens?

The Minister for Trade Policy who opened the debate is no longer in his place, but the idea that being in the European Union has somehow stopped us trading with the rest of the world is nonsense. If that were the case, how is it that our largest single trading partner, the world is a country with which we do not have a trade agreement—the United States? If that is the case, why is it that our trade with China has increased by 64% since 2010 and China is now our fifth largest trading partner?

Having said all that, there are areas in which the European Union needs to show greater flexibility in the negotiations. It has done particular, different or special
deals with its external partners—Canada, Norway, Ukraine, Switzerland and Turkey. Let us take the example of our continued participation in EU agencies, which are very important to business and therefore to trade. When the Prime Minister mentioned the European Aviation Safety Agency, the European Medicines Agency and the European Chemicals Agency, the European Union’s response—basically, “No. You can’t take part. They’re the rules. Forget it!”—was spectacularly ill-judged.

We should say to all those we speak to in Europe, “Now, come on. You could have said, ‘Let’s sit down and talk about how we can do this, but you’ll have to pay, you’ll have to abide by the rules and you’ll have to accept judgments of the European Court of Justice.’” Such an approach should not be a problem for the Government because, in the Prime Minister’s speech on security in Munich, she said that to maintain co-operation with our closest external partners—Canada, Norway, Ukraine, Switzerland and Turkey. Let us take the example of reality beginning to dawn on the red lines of the Government’s policy.

Caroline Lucas: On the gulf between what was promised and what is now being delivered, both economically and on the issue of Northern Ireland, would the right hon. Gentleman at least be willing to keep an open mind on the merits and wisdom of the people having a say on the Brexit deal?

Hilary Benn: Although I am tempted by the hon. Lady’s intervention to get into my views, which I think are well known, about a second referendum, I hope she will forgive me if I do not do so, in view of the pressure of time.

The other issue I want to mention is timing. Although we are two thirds of the way through the withdrawal process, we have not even started negotiating our future relationship with a deal that is meant to stand us in good stead for decades to come, and it is not something that can be done in a hurry. I therefore make a plea for flexibility both during the remainder of the article 50 period and during the transition period, when the bulk of the negotiations will be done.

Since this is a debate about European affairs, I want to talk about some of the broader challenges we face in Europe and about Britain’s contribution to addressing them at a time when so much of our effort, energy and time is being spent dealing with the consequences of Brexit. Let us take the nerve agent attack in Salisbury. This is exactly the circumstance in which we need a multilateral response—the Prime Minister spoke about that today—and, in the case of Europe, we need the closest possible co-operation. Yet this is also the moment when we are undermining such co-operation through Brexit, and pulling apart that relationship in the hope, which I accept is what the Prime Minister has said she wants, of then rebuilding it. In the truth, of the use of that nerve agent is exactly the reason we need to conclude swiftly an agreement for co-operation with the other 27 members on defence, security, foreign policy and the fight against terrorism.

There are so many other things to which we should be turning our attention. How are we going to sustain strong economies in Europe? How are we going to respond to what is a wave of nostalgia for an age gone by—people are trying to come to terms with change—that informs much of the support for some political parties and movements right across Europe? When we look at the Mediterranean, we can see the extent of youth unemployment in north African countries and the challenges they face in meeting the needs of their populations. When we look at climate change, we should think of the people who will flee if droughts or downpours force them to do so, never mind the fact that people will in the end kill each other not because of their different political views, but because they are fighting over natural resources, including water. We should also think about threats to peace and security and about the onward march of technology, with the challenges and the fantastic opportunities that it will create.

While we wrestle with the desire for greater self-determination and control, we must not lose sight in the multilateral institutions—the European Union, the UN and others—that we created to give ourselves a better chance of dealing with those challenges. If we have learned one thing from the past 100 years, never mind the past 1,000 years, it is that, to be able to look after ourselves, we must look after others, and to do that successfully we have to learn to work together.

4.59 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who, as ever, was very eloquent. I heartily endorse his point about using multilateral institutions, but I fear that the failure of Europe to act in an appropriately tough way after the murder of Litvinenko may well have led the Russian state to think that it could have another go here. I would have argued for sanctions to be applied, particularly against Russia’s gas exports, as I think that that would have had a big impact. I support the right hon. Gentleman’s calls and the solidarity shown by Europe, but I ask it to go further and to consider strict measures against the Russian state.

I want to address the importance of not so much our trade in goods, but our trade in services, which has been under-represented in many of our debates on Europe. I do so particularly in the light of the other aggressive statements by President Trump in the past few days. Services are vital for our prosperity. They constitute almost 80% of UK GDP and 80% of UK jobs, as well as 45% of our exports. A large proportion of our service exports go to Europe. In fact, this trade is worth £90 billion annually, which is more than the Government spend on transport, housing, the environment, industry, employment and agriculture combined. When we look at these services in those terms, we understand the importance of a deal for the service sector. That is not just about financial services, because it also includes sectors such as insurance, legal, cultural and digital services.

I welcome the Prime Minister’s commitment to an ambitious and comprehensive deal, which will be essential, as it will have to cover a range of sectors, including the service sectors, with their various requirements and needs. I therefore encourage Ministers to be bold. The exit analysis produced by a number of Departments, using the most up-to-date economic model, shows that the real threat to UK plc comes from non-tariff barriers. We can have a debate about the customs union, but I argue that it is non-tariff barriers that create the biggest threat to the UK economy.
Mark Garnier: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of non-tariff barriers. The World Trade Organisation itself identified that there were 300 non-tariff barriers in 2010, and the figure rose to 1,200 by 2015. Does she agree that Great Britain can be a strong advocate of free trade in the WTO and can try to drive a reduction in not only tariffs, but non-tariff barriers?

Antoinette Sandbach: Of course there is nothing to prevent us from doing that at the moment. In fact, the number of non-tariff barriers has increased during our membership of the WTO, even though we are also a member of the EU. That is a real and significant danger to the UK economy.

I hope that we will look in detail at sectors such as the three that I want to address: digital, insurance and legal. The digital sector covers a huge range of industries. They are not just new tech businesses; they cover a wide range of services for many companies. They are exposed to the same risks as many other service industries, but they also have to contend with data protection rules that will impact on data flows after Brexit.

TechUK says that digital makes up 16% of UK output and 10% of UK employment. It is a significant export sector, and about 96% of output and 81% of exports are in services. That is key. It is vital that we look at an agreement that deals with cross-border data flows with not only Europe, although 75% of our data flows are with Europe. We are one of the most advanced countries for trading online. Our consumers are extremely educated in and knowledgeable about buying goods and services online. It is important that we look at how we address these issues in a future deal.

Even if we maintain identical regulation with the EU, there are questions regarding the legal basis on which companies can transfer data between the UK and the EU27. It would be for the European Commission to assess whether we had achieved adequacy. Failure to achieve adequacy could force localisation or the redirection of an EU citizen's data. That fragmentation could create significant costs for UK businesses, which would have to implement alternative legal structures. According to one study, cross-EU data localisation could cost between 0.4% and 1.1% of GDP, and lead to significant drops in private investment and a drop in service exports. The uncertainty over whether a deal will be struck could see companies restrict the amount of data they store and process in the UK in the short term.

The second area I want to address is UK legal services. The UK legal services industry has made it absolutely clear that the CETA model does not provide a comprehensive framework for professional services. I would argue that the Government need to be looking at Norway-minus, not Canada-plus-plus-plus. It is clear that the impact of no deal on services in the legal industry would be more dramatic than it would be on the insurance industry. That is because a widely established series of EU directives has created a really well functioning market in legal services in the EU. The sector is worth £26 billion to the UK, which is the equivalent of 1.5% of GDP, and employs more than 3,800 people, often in highly paid and high-skilled jobs. In 2016, there was a net export of £4 billion from the legal services sector into Europe.

It is vital that, when we look at the customs union, the EEA should be the plan B. I agree very much with what my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) said. We absolutely support the Prime Minister in going out and getting that deep and special partnership deal, but if for any reason we cannot achieve that deal, the plan B should be an EEA/EFTA-style deal. That should be the fall-back, not WTO arrangements. If any of my constituents wonder how I have reached that conclusion, they should look online—it is on the parliamentary website—at the analysis that has been produced across Departments indicating that an EEA-style departure or agreement would be the least damaging option for the UK economy. That would still allow us to go out and strike trade deals—there are trade deals with 57 other countries—and to go into a potential market of 900 million people. We could still do fantastic trade with the Chinese, because when the Prime Minister returned from her recent China visit, she had signed £9 billion-worth of trade deals. I would argue that that option needs to be very seriously considered by the Government as a plan B.

5.9 pm

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), whose thinking in some respects is very similar to mine.

Unfortunately, we are in a situation in which a Conservative Government find themselves in the unenviable position of not having a majority in Parliament while there are big divisions among their Back Benchers. They have an arrogant disregard for the practical realities they face, particularly with regard to their negotiation stance with the EU27 on Brexit. From “Brexit means Brexit” to “deep and special relationship”, and now “managed divergence”, it is clear that the Prime Minister is trying to find forms of words that will hold her party together, rather than producing a firm negotiating stance that is clearly understood by the EU and has a reasonable chance of success.

The marriage of convenience between the Conservative party and the Democratic Unionist party can be sustained only by the additional payment of £1 billion to Northern Ireland and an agreement over not having a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This marriage is predicated, obviously, not only on a payment from the Exchequer to Belfast, but on the understanding that the free movement of goods, services and people across the border between the north and south of Ireland can be negotiated successfully with the EU27 without the UK having access to the single market or being in the customs union. Currently, that seems highly unlikely at best, and impossible at worst.

Without an agreement on access to the single market, as well as some agreement on a customs union, it is difficult to see how the Democratic Unionists can avoid a hard border. Current indications from Brussels give the impression that the EU27 will not be willing to agree on an open border unless there is some agreement in those two areas. All in all, the Government have a huge mountain to climb, are badly equipped to do so,
and seem to think that the solution is to placate their own Back Benchers, rather than carrying out serious negotiations with our European neighbours.

It is now 21 months since the referendum and there is still little agreement between the EU and the UK on many key issues. The leave campaign promised that an extra £350 million a week could be spent on the NHS if we left the European Union. We now find a Government with a Foreign Secretary who was one of the leaders of the leave campaign and who said that the EU could “go whistle” when it became clear that the UK had to pay to leave the European Union to meet obligations that had already been agreed with the EU. On the contrary, the Government have now agreed to pay £40 billion to £50 billion to exit the EU. That is in sharp contrast to the £350 million a week that was going to come back into the NHS.

The so-called “sufficient progress” that was claimed to have been made in the first phase of Brexit still overlooks the details of what would be required to deal with a hard border with Ireland and to guarantee citizens’ rights in a manner acceptable to the UK and the EU. Within the phase 2 negotiations that should focus on the framework of a future relationship, we find that the EU is focusing on a “framework” while the UK talks about a “future relationship”. Little seems to be agreed about whether the transitional deal can be extended beyond two years, and a date of October this year to formalise talks on a transition is far too late to give businesses throughout the UK any sort of certainty about how they can continue to conduct business with companies in the EU27 states.

My view is similar to that of the hon. Member for Eddisbury: the UK should have adopted a negotiating stance of realising an outcome similar to the position of Norway, which has access to the single market despite the fact that it is not a member of the EU. On top of that, I would have liked to have seen a discussion about a customs union that would be far better than Turkey’s, which we could have negotiated with the EU27 in good faith. However, we have a Prime Minister who says that we do not want to be in the single market or the customs union. She wants a bespoke trade deal just for the UK, but she seems oblivious to the fact that such a proposal would seriously undermine the European single market and is therefore totally unacceptable to the EU.

The introduction of the concept of “managed divergence” seems to be more about managing the diverse range of views among Conservative Back Benchers than managing emerging differences between EU and UK regulations. The Chequers Brexit awayday, which was held to achieve a truce between the warring factions of the Conservative party, resulted in a negotiating stance of “ambitious managed divergence”. That form of words satisfied both the Brexiteers and the remainers, but it will find no support in the EU27 when these hard-headed negotiations finally get going.

The EU wants the Prime Minister to come forward with her vision of a future relationship between the EU and the UK. The managed divergence she talks about is known as the “three basket” approach, because it has three tiers: a core tier, where the UK would agree to align fully with EU regulations and adopt new rules automatically; a middle tier, where there would be a form of managed mutual recognition of rules, such as for environmental protection; and an outer tier, where the UK would be free to diverge from EU rules with no consequences for market access, whether or not those areas are in the single market’s acquis. The notion that the EU will be willing to accept three baskets of regulations in its trading arrangements with the UK is delusional and makes the British Government themselves look like a basket case.

This whole Brexit catastrophe is like watching a car crash in slow motion, except that the driver, the Prime Minister, is holding her hands over her eyes and trying to convince the passengers—her own party and the public—that everything will turn out fine. It can only result in humiliation for the Prime Minister when it is made clear that managed divergence is not acceptable and that this inflexible attitude towards the single market, the customs union and, for that matter, the European Court of Justice cannot continue. One can envisage the outcome being a hard Brexit. That hard Brexit is the favoured option of some of the Brexiteers in her party, but it could destroy any hope of a soft border between the north and the south of Ireland.

The Prime Minister should stiffen her resolve and tell her recalcitrant Back Benchers that our trading relationship with the EU is still important, even though we are leaving the EU. She should get down to serious negotiations that will preserve jobs and businesses up and down this country, instead of leading us off a cliff edge that will result in a WTO-style agreement.

5.16 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I would like to focus on the ongoing negotiations between Scotland’s two Governments on the powers set to be transferred from Brussels to the Scottish Parliament, which will have an impact on Scotland’s ability to do business and trade, especially if we get it wrong.

While those negotiations are ongoing, and in the light of the fact that the UK Government have now published their amendment to clause 11 of the EU withdrawal Bill, the SNP Scottish Government are rushing another Brexit Bill through the Scottish Parliament. The EU withdrawal Bill may have its faults, but it is at least legal; the same cannot be said of the SNP Government’s so-called continuity Bill, which is currently being considered by Holyrood. It has been ruled unlawful by the Scottish Parliament’s Presiding Officer and strongly criticised as inconsistent by a range of experts, yet it is still being rushed through in a few days with minimal scrutiny by MSPs.

Stewart Hosie: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be very clear in his words. The continuity Bill has not been declared illegal by anyone. The Presiding Officer has raised a question over its competency, but as the hon. Gentleman well knows, the Lord Advocate has said that it has been carefully drafted so that it is not incompatible with EU law and does nothing to alter EU law until after Brexit, and he made the rather serious point that it is simply preparing for Brexit in exactly the same way as the UK’s withdrawal Bill. I hope, therefore, for the sake of clarity and accuracy, that the “illegal” word will be withdrawn.
**John Lamont:** I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s point, although I suggest he read very carefully what the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament has said, and I remind him that the Lord Advocate is a Scottish Government Minister and so of course supports the Scottish Government’s proposal. The Presiding Officer is the ultimate determiner of which Bills are competent to come through the Scottish Government.

**Paul Masterton:** Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the narrative appears to be being perpetuated that the Presiding Officer sat in his office one evening, read the draft Bill and reached the conclusion on competency on his own, as opposed to having received a range of extensive and incredibly high-quality legal advice from a range of Scotland’s leading law firms?

**John Lamont:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The Presiding Officer has done this not in a vacuum but with the advice of the Scottish Parliament’s lawyers and others, and it is misjudged by the Scottish Government to think they can push ahead regardless of his view.

Just 11 MSPs are currently considering and voting on more than 230 amendments to the Bill in what was originally planned to be a single sitting that started at a quarter to six last night. Late nights may not be unusual here, but it is unprecedented in the Scottish Parliament for so many amendments to be given so little time to be considered. I remind Members that the Chamber of the Scottish Parliament is given only one opportunity to consider a Bill in detail, and that it has no revising power. I remind Members that the Chamber of the Scottish Parliament is given only one opportunity to consider a Bill in detail, and that it has no revising power. I remind Members that the Chamber of the Scottish Parliament is given only one opportunity to consider a Bill in detail, and that it has no revising power. I remind Members that the Chamber of the Scottish Parliament is given only one opportunity to consider a Bill in detail, and that it has no revising power. I remind Members that the Chamber of the Scottish Parliament is given only one opportunity to consider a Bill in detail, and that it has no revising power.

**Anna McMorrin** (Cardiff North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman referred to the lawfulness of the continuity Bill. Does he agree that in Wales the Presiding Officer has deemed it lawful?

**John Lamont:** The legislation that created the Scottish Parliament is very different from that which created the Welsh Assembly. I do not know whether the powers are similar, but, having served in the Scottish Parliament for 10 years, I do know that it is for the Presiding Officer to determine whether Bills are competent to be considered by the Scottish Parliament, and the Scottish Parliament’s Presiding Officer was very clear about the fact that this Bill was not competent.

If passed, the Bill would give Scottish Ministers a raft of powers, including the power to decide which bits of EU law they wanted to adopt in domestic law. Those decisions should rest with the Scottish Parliament, and that, I suggest, is the real power grab. It will do nothing to help Scotland to trade, or to protect businesses in Scotland that trade with the rest of the EU or, indeed, with countries around the world. The fact that the SNP Government are pushing the Bill through Holyrood, ignoring the views of the Presiding Officer and avoiding any meaningful scrutiny by MSPs, shows what the SNP really thinks of the Scottish Parliament and democratic accountability.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): I have a huge amount of respect for the hon. Gentleman, but I hope he will put on the record that the only party in the Scottish Parliament that opposes the Bill is the Conservative party. Otherwise, on a cross-party basis, the democratically elected Scottish Parliament supports it. As for the hon. Gentleman’s point about the Committee system, he is a former Member of that Parliament, and he knows fine well that the legislation is scrutinised in Committee.

**John Lamont:** I also understand the huge inadequacies of the Committee system in the Scottish Parliament. The other place here is not perfect, but at least it has the ability to amend and genuinely scrutinise. Yesterday, there were more than four and a half hours of debate on the continuity Bill. How many hours, how many minutes, did Back-Bench SNP MSPs contribute to that? Just over two minutes. That shows the level of accountability to which SNP MSPs subject their Government in the Scottish Parliament.

Ever since the introduction of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill—in fact, ever since the result of EU referendum was known—the SNP has been desperately trying to make Brexit into an excuse to have another go at independence, but I am pleased to say that Scots are not buying it. As Professor Curtice has just pointed out, “rather than creating a bandwagon in favour of independence, Brexit served to expose a fissure in the nationalist movement that Nicola Sturgeon has struggled to straddle.”

The introduction of the SNP’s continuity Bill is just the latest attempt at that. The Bill is damaging because it makes a deal on these powers—a deal that the SNP claims it wants to make—less rather than more likely. It is also damaging because it adds yet more constitutional uncertainty at an already difficult time, and it will do nothing to increase Scotland’s ability to trade with the rest of the EU and, just as important, with other countries.

Moreover, the Bill is unnecessary, because we now have an amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill that essentially flips clause 11 around and that is accompanied by a list from the UK Government of the areas where a UK common framework is necessary. No such list, I note, has been produced by the Scottish Government. Those frameworks are critical to our ability to trade throughout the United Kingdom and in those other countries.

But let us take a step back from the rhetoric and grandstanding of the nationalists on the Benches opposite and, indeed, in the Scottish Government. If we take that step back, we see that this is really a minor disagreement. The list of powers that the SNP claims are being taken away from the Scottish Parliament relate to, for instance, late payment of commercial debts and the labelling of honey. These might well be important powers, but is aviation noise management really being discussed around the dinner tables of Scotland, or is the talk of the pub really who is going to control good laboratory practice? I think not. More importantly, despite the rhetoric of a power grab the reality is that not a single one of these powers is being taken away from the Scottish Parliament, for the simple fact is that the Scottish Parliament does not control these powers currently; Brussels does. And the majority of these powers are going to be coming to the Scottish Parliament; the so-called power-grabbers in Westminster are going
to be sending new powers Holyrood’s way, and that is after passing a Scotland Act in 2016, which has already made Holyrood one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world.

Despite talk of a crisis, the UK and Scottish Governments agreed on the way forward; the vast majority of these powers which have been built up in Brussels will be coming back to the Scottish Parliament. Some will, however require UK-wide frameworks and both the UK and Scottish Governments agree on this approach.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): If we were playing a little game here that for every time the hon. Gentleman mentioned the SNP we would have a drink, we would be drunk by now. I remember the days not so long ago when he believed that the consent of the Scottish Parliament would be required before these frameworks were agreed and put forward. What has happened?

John Lamont: We accept that the consent of the Scottish Parliament is required, but the hon. Gentleman’s party leader, Nicola Sturgeon, in Holyrood is deliberately creating the politics of grievance. She is creating division and deliberately not reaching that agreement, to stove up what the Scottish nationalists think is going to get them to their ultimate goal: a second referendum on independence. We are having none of it; we are having absolutely none of it.

It makes sense to ensure that businesses do not face the risk of new barriers to trade with other parts of the UK. The Scottish Government accept that, for example, different labelling requirements or different regulations on pesticides across the UK would stifle trade and are not in the interests of Scottish businesses. So the only disagreement is over how this approach is implemented, which is hardly the making of a constitutional crisis and is hardly an excuse to push through unlawful and rushed legislation, as the SNP is currently doing in the Scottish Parliament.

Karin Smyth: It is always fascinating for the rest of us to listen to the debate going on among Scottish colleagues on this issue, but, talking about the Union, is the hon. Gentleman not remotely concerned that his Government are being propped up by the 10 votes of the Democratic Unionist party in this Chamber? Does he not think that perhaps the demands that austerity and Brexit are forcing on our constituencies are having a greater effect of undermining the Union than what he is currently talking about?

John Lamont: I totally reject that suggestion. The Prime Minister has been clear that her objective through Brexit is to achieve the best deal for all parts of the United Kingdom, including Scotland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Time is up.

5.27 pm

Chuka Umunna (Stratham) (Lab): I welcome this debate, but I do not welcome the fact that the Government continually duck having votes in this House on these matters, or that they continue to do everything they can to withhold appropriate information so that we can come to an informed view on behalf of our constituents.

My view is that when we are asked to vote on the withdrawal agreement that the Prime Minister is supposed to return to this House with in the autumn, we should be granted a free vote given the magnitude of the agreement and what we are dealing with and its importance for future generations in this country.

As we can see every single day, it is clear that the Brexit process has been a total and utter mess. Article 50 should never have been invoked at the time that it was invoked; we should have had the debate we are having now before it was invoked. It is extraordinary that we have only been given serious detail by the Prime Minister this month, more than a year and a half after she took office and when we are halfway through these Brexit negotiations. Only now do we seem to have more clarity from the Government on the direction in which they wish to take this country in these Brexit negotiations.

I give the Prime Minister this: her speech was significant because for the first time it officially acknowledged what we know to be true, which is that the Government are voluntarily choosing to pursue a policy that they have admitted is going to make this country poorer. She made it clear in her speech that we were going to get less access and that we would not have a frictionless border. She talked about achieving as frictionless a border as possible—[Interruption.] It is no use Ministers shaking their heads. We know from the impact assessments that they commissioned from their own civil servants that the options they are choosing to pursue will make this country poorer. Let us be clear about this. We hear all this talk about our EU friends seeking to bully our country and to punish us, but they are not doing that. At the outset, they put a range of options on the table, including remaining a member of the single market and the customs union, and it was this Prime Minister who took those options off the table.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right. Our European partners have said clearly that the red lines that this Government have set themselves mean that the goals they wish to achieve are impossible. We cannot blame our EU partners for that, because they are the Government’s own red lines.

Chuka Umunna: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is the Prime Minister who is dictating the kind of agreement that we will reach with the European Union.

Let us be clear about what has happened since 2016. In March 2016, the Office for Budget Responsibility was forecasting that our economy would grow by 2.1% this year, next year and the year after. However, because of the judgments and decisions that this Government have made, the OBR is now forecasting that our economy will grow by a paltry 1.5% this year, 1.3% next year and 1.3% the year after. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) is chuntering in his place, but I say to him that I cannot remember a time since the war when a GDP forecast was coming in at under 2% for every year. This forecast is a result of the policy decisions that he is making.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The Government’s strategy on these negotiations is a shambles, as my hon. Friend has indicated. More importantly, however, they are banking on the Trump Administration bailing them out. They think they are going to get great deals from the Trump
Administration, but if we look at agriculture, for example, we can see that they are not going to get any great deals at all.

**Chuka Umunna:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and I will say more about that shortly.

One of the most extraordinary things about the Prime Minister’s speech was that she did not explain how the future relationship that she set out was going to help the NHS, particularly given that so many of her Cabinet Ministers went around telling us that voting to leave the European Union would lead to a bounty for the NHS.

The number of EU nurse applications is down 96%, and we lost 10,000 health workers from our NHS in the year after the referendum vote. We now have 100,000 vacancies in the NHS that need to be filled. There was no mention at all of this in her speech. I think it was the director of the Vote Leave campaign, Dominic Cummings, who said that if people such as the Foreign Secretary, the Environment Secretary and the Trade Secretary had not gone round saying what they said about the NHS, we would not be in this situation today.

Let me return to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) has just made about new trade deals. I agree with the Minister for Trade Policy that there is not an either/or choice about whether we pursue trade with the EU or with the rest of the world, even though that argument is often made from the Government Dispatch Box. Let us get real about this. This is not a question about whether this country is going to be able to do trade deals after we have left the European Union. We will be able to do trade deals after we have left the EU—if we leave the EU—but the question is: on what terms? When we negotiate with China with its 1.2 billion people, we are not going to get the same terms, because we are a much smaller economy relative to the big economies that we are negotiating alongside 500 million people on our side of the table. We, a country of 65 million people, are not going to get the same terms, because we are a much smaller economy relative to the big economies that we want to trade with. That is the reality. My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South is absolutely right to refer to President Trump. He is not going to ride to our rescue. We need only look at what he is doing to our steel industry with his 25% tariffs.

My final observation about the Prime Minister’s speech is that I have not spoken to any diplomat, EU ambassador or EU Foreign Minister who thinks that this Government’s technological solution to the hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland will resolve the issue. Nobody I have spoken to believes that that will happen.

What does that lead me to conclude? The form of Brexit that was sold to the British people is simply not deliverable. I will give this to the Government: it is not necessarily simply a matter of competence; it is the reality that so many of the promises that were made to people, whether they voted leave or remain, simply cannot be delivered. That is one reason why I think that—the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) made this point—if we are to leave the European Union, we should at the very least seek to keep this country’s full participation in the customs union and, to my mind, in the single market.

As far as I am concerned, if someone wants to end austerity and to promote social justice, they have to support that position. Being part of the framework of the single market and the customs union would be no impediment to the implementation of the Labour manifesto, to our pursuing the nationalisations that we want or to other matters.

One of the things that I am most struck by as I go around my constituency at the moment is that many members of the public are just fed up with the Brexit process. They just want it to be gone. They want us to get on with it. But there is a recognition that the process is far more complex than anybody had thought and that it is throwing up all kinds of issues that nobody thought would be connected to Brexit. Who on earth would have thought that Brexit would be connected to the transport of isotopes used for medical research and cancer treatment?

However, the group of people in my constituency who have the most visceral and strong views about what is going on are the young people. They believe that what is going on is robbing them of the opportunities that older generations have taken for granted. They cannot understand why we would want to be doing this to them. That is why I think this House should have a free vote on the matter. The issue transcends party politics and politics more broadly. It is an issue of national interest, and I do not believe that the younger generation will ever forgive us, the generation of politicians sitting in this House of Commons, if we do not do the right thing by them and secure their futures, ensuring that they have the same opportunities that all of us enjoy now in the European Union.

5.37 pm

**Ross Thomson** (Aberdeen South) (Con): As someone who actually represents, I hope, the young people of the next generation, I do not share the pessimism of the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna), because the great Brexit prize will be regaining our ability to strike new free trade deals across the world. Not only will Britain rejoin the rest of the world, but we will have the opportunity to lead the rest of the world as a global free-trading nation, championing trade liberalisation and taking on the voices of protectionism. Let me be clear that we are not leaving Europe or turning our backs on our European neighbours and partners. Rather, the Prime Minister has been explicit that the Government are seeking a deep and comprehensive trade deal with the EU that covers goods and services.

By leaving the customs union, the UK will regain its ability to set its own independent trade policy. Our trade with the EU is in deficit and declining. As the Minister stated in his opening remarks, it was 56% in 2006 and is now down to 43%. However, our trade with the rest of the world is in surplus and rising. We should not play down the importance of Europe as a trading market and partner, but we must orient ourselves towards the thriving economies in the rest of the world, such as in south and east Asia, and their growing demand for goods and services. Fifty-seven per cent. of Britain’s exports are now to outside the EU compared with only 46% in 2006. Furthermore, the International Monetary Fund estimates that 90% of global economic growth in the next 10 to 15 years will originate from outside the EU.

International demands for British goods is growing, and Aberdeen, which I represent, is well placed to take advantage of that as 90% of the city’s manufacturing,
which is mainly in oil and gas and environmental engineering, gets exported. The oil and gas industry is truly global, and anchored right here in the UK. Current industry exports accounted for 43% of the UK supply chain turnover in 2017, up from 41% in 2016. Oil & Gas UK’s “Vision 2035” has the ambitious aim of doubling the supply chain share of the global market from 3.7% to 7.4% in 2035.

The Balmoral Group, based in my constituency, provides an example. It was established back in 1980 and specialises in sub-sea buoyancy, renewable energy and engineering solutions. It employs about 500 people in Aberdeen. It is highly dependent on the export market: it is currently focusing on west Africa, South America and the gulf of Mexico. Its representatives have been clear with me that their only opportunity for growth is in the export market. They have already been working closely with the Department for International Trade on trying to exploit those opportunities.

Thanks to the investment from the UK Government, the Oil & Gas Technology Centre in my constituency was set up. It is working with the oil industry in developing solutions, new technology and innovation to maximise the full potential of the UK North sea—from asset integrity to maximising recovery from small pools, from drilling to decommissioning. The technology, developed in my constituency, is exportable and the opportunities are massive.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) highlighted, the north-east is home to a thriving food and drink industry. It is also known for its whisky exports. The story of whisky is well known; perhaps a less told story is that about our other domestic whisky exports. The story of whisky is well known; (David Duguid) highlighted, the north-east is home to a whisky exportable and the opportunities are massive. It was established back in 1980 and specialises in sub-sea buoyancy, renewable energy and engineering solutions. It employs about 500 people in Aberdeen. It is highly dependent on the export market: it is currently focusing on west Africa, South America and the gulf of Mexico. Its representatives have been clear with me that their only opportunity for growth is in the export market.

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As my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) highlighted, the north-east is home to a thriving food and drink industry. It is also known for its whisky exports. The story of whisky is well known; perhaps a less told story is that about our other domestic exports. Here are just a few examples. In fishing, there are companies such as Macduff Shellfish, Denholm Seafoods and Lunar Freezing, which export to countries such as Nigeria, China, Vietnam, Uruguay and Ukraine.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): During the EU referendum campaign, the hon. Gentleman was pictured outside the Scottish Parliament with a placard saying, “Vote leave to bring control of our fishing back to the democratically elected Scottish Parliament”. Will he be recirculating that image?

Ross Thomson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that. As is so clear, we are leaving the European Union and taking back control of the more than 200 nautical miles of our waters, giving us the opportunity to rejuvenate our coastal communities. We are supporting Scottish fishermen. The party that wants to sell them down the river back to Brussels, handing all the powers right back and keeping people trapped within the confines of the common fisheries policy, is every single Member from the SNP. I will take no lectures from those on the SNP Benches about the benefits of Brexit for fishermen.

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Gentleman is talking about the economy. Does he believe the figures that the UK Government have produced about the hit to GDP from leaving the EU?

Ross Thomson: No. The figures that have been produced are not based on what the Prime Minister has said herself she wants to achieve: a deep and special relationship with Europe. None of the figures is based on that assumption.

There are huge opportunities for Aberdeen and the wider north-east to use our competitive advantage to seize the benefits of Brexit. We must set our sights on the future—a new global future. It would not be in our or the EU’s interests for there to be any unnecessary restrictions on trade. I am confident that the Prime Minister will deliver a new, bespoke partnership that will support our mutual interests. The UK is the world’s fifth largest economy, the fifth largest exporter and the second greatest soft power. Our worldwide presence is reinforced by our global brands, our creative industries and the reputation of our universities. Britain is truly global and we must be ambitious in order to maximise the golden Brexit trade opportunities that lie ahead of us.

5.45 pm

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): I want to start by talking about the approaching constitutional crisis that this Government are threatening to bring about. This Tory Government continue to put the established constitutional order and devolution settlements at risk with their blatant grab of devolved powers. After months of debating and meetings, they are still struggling to grasp the concept of the consent of our devolved Administrations. We must not see powers that are devolved under the current devolution settlement going from Brussels to Westminster without consent from Cardiff and Edinburgh. During the last meeting of the JMC, the Welsh Government were told that the UK Government would not be pressing amendments on this to a vote before further discussions, and today it is down to the Prime Minister and the First Ministers of both Wales and Scotland to try to end this stalemate. However, I do not see any new offer coming forward and time is running out. It is very troubling that, even though the Welsh Government compromised by accepting that several rules and regulations currently decided in Brussels will need to be operated on a UK-wide basis, this UK Government cannot bring themselves to reassure the devolved Administrations that their consent and agreement will be sought. This is just not good enough.

In Wales, we are being expected to accept that decisions on up to 24 policy areas, including agriculture, pesticides, animal welfare, organic farming and the environment, are to be taken in Westminster, without any consultation and without consent from Cardiff.

Paul Masterton: Will the hon. Lady tell us how much influence the Welsh Government currently have in the setting of those frameworks within the EU and whether the EU obtains the consent of the Welsh Government when setting them?

Anna McMorrin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, but he is completely missing the point. We are looking at those powers coming back to Westminster,
and they should be going back to Cardiff and Edinburgh where those powers are devolved. Both Cardiff and Edinburgh—Wales and Scotland—play a part in those discussions at EU level all the time.

David Linden: I am sure the hon. Lady will agree that the devolution settlement is clear that, if something is not reserved when it returns to us, it is then devolved. That is why this is a power grab in respect of the devolved settlement.

Anna McMorrin: I agree that this constitutes an absolute power grab by this UK Government. Until we see substantive changes to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, there is the need for the continuity Bill. It would be preferable to continue to protect devolution via the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill—that is what I want to see—but should agreement not be reached, the continuity Bill becomes one of the most important pieces of legislation ever to be scrutinised by the Welsh Assembly.

May I pay tribute to my colleague Mark Drakeford, a Cabinet Secretary in Wales, and the Welsh Government for pursuing that important piece of legislation, in the absence of an agreement being forthcoming from this Tory UK Government? The Bill is complex, but very clear in its aims. It is intended to deal with the inevitable consequences in domestic law of withdrawal from the EU by preserving EU law covering subjects already devolved to Wales; it will enable Welsh Ministers to make necessary changes to ensure that legislation works at the point of withdrawal. That is what we need to see.

The Tory Government have questions to answer, not just for Cardiff and Edinburgh but for people everywhere—people in my constituency of Cardiff North, in Wales, in the UK, and our friends and allies throughout Europe. After months of the Government’s trying to cover up the Brexit impact assessments, MPs were finally allowed to see them, as I did. I made the appointment, handed over my phone, which was locked up in a cupboard, and was allowed the hour given to look at them. A week later, they were distributed everywhere. I was concerned to read that the Government’s own assessment is that this country’s economic growth will suffer under any of the existing models for a future relationship with the EU. Under the worst-case scenario, a WTO-type agreement, which has often been hailed by the Confederation of British Industry—or politics interact with our European counterparts in Germany, France and elsewhere, we are treated as if we live in la-la land?

When will the Government face the challenges of the unrealistic standards of their own internal party politics, which they have set to serve their own infatuation with an isolated Britain that has long gone? When will the Government tell us the truth about the effects of leaving the customs union and single market and offer a plan that, at the very least, does not feel like a suicide mission? When will they offer a plan that safeguards the future of our businesses and protects environmental and workers’ rights, our services, our people and our communities?

5.52 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): This is an extremely important debate. The 27 other countries in the EU make up our largest trading partner, which accounts for almost half our trade. Many thousands of jobs on both sides of the channel rely on that trade. This is a sensitive time for the most complex negotiations for a generation. Businesses need clarity, especially about what will happen at our borders. They need to know what our long-term trade will look like, especially in key 21st-century sectors such as pharmaceuticals, advanced manufacturing and the service sector. They also need clarity on what transition or implementation will look like.

Honesty and transparency are needed, but let us look at the Opposition’s offer. They say that they want to negotiate a customs union with the EU, but the Leader of the Opposition stood up in Coventry and said that he wanted to negotiate exemptions in relation to privatisation, competition and state aid rules. The week after that, I was in Brussels. Not a single country that has a customs union with the EU has an exemption for state aid rules. Even Turkey has to comply with all state aid and competition rules, in accordance with the EU treaties and/or EU laws. When I was in Brussels, time and again I asked politicians from other EU countries whether they would give the UK preferred access to the single market and a customs union with the EU but also allow us an exemption from state aid rules. Time and again, those politicians looked at me and rolled their eyes. The Opposition’s position is not honest or achievable, and I believe it is deeply misleading.

In trade negotiations, the devil is in the detail. The Prime Minister’s speech was very welcome. It moved us on with a huge amount of detail, and I especially welcomed the detail about the aviation sector, the tech sector, the science and innovation pact—boy, do we need to continue co-operation on science and innovation—and security.

I want to focus on three areas. On services, UK sales to the EU in services are 40% of our trade. The sector has grown as a percentage of our trade in nearly every year. In today’s modern economy, we cannot separate goods and services. My mobile phone, for example, feels like a good, but its contents are all services. If a cancer scanner is sold in Europe, it is sold with a maintenance contract—a service. I am about to buy a new car, and it will come with a financial lease arrangement—a financial service. Walking away with no deal on services is not a good deal. It is especially not good for financial services. Some 2,000 people in my constituency work in insurance, but many hundreds of thousands of German savers have bought life insurance products from British companies. Both sides need a deal that covers services.

On borders and the customs union, while we need an agreement about what happens at our borders, there is much more to the customs union and negotiations than
just tariffs. In particular, we need to resolve the country of origin rules for complex manufactured products. The British car sector employs about 169,000 people directly and nearly 1 million indirectly. Many of the cars it produces contain components from all over the EU. Under WTO rules, those cars are not European enough to be European cars or British enough to be British cars. They would become orphan cars, if I may put it like that, and not eligible under any of our trade agreements with the EU or elsewhere. That is why it is particularly helpful that the Prime Minister has left open the negotiations on not just a customs agreement, but a customs partnership, which is an offer for us to mirror EU customs codes at our borders.

My third point, which is really important, is about transition. The transition period needs to be agreed now, because otherwise real issues will arise for people who work in the City and with goods. On the back of my mobile phone is a CE mark. Every product put on the market in Europe has one, and anything that is imported to the UK needs a CE mark. The mark is offered with a 12-month certificate. If a mobile phone is imported into the UK from elsewhere in the world, it will need a certificate that is valid past not just the end of this March, but the end of next March. Unless we resolve transition this month, what happens to CE marks on goods placed on the market here and elsewhere in Europe will not be resolved. There are not enough notified bodies elsewhere in Europe to take the place of the British notified bodies today.

I am grateful to the Government for getting us to the negotiating point to date, for achieving the deal in December and for the great moves forward and detail in the Prime Minister’s speech a couple of weeks ago. Let us resolve the transition period by the end of the month—that is crucial—and let us not lose sight of the devil in the detail of the negotiations ahead. The Leader of the Opposition’s position is not achievable, and we need to focus on finding deals that are.

5.58 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Nothing I have seen since the referendum has convinced me that the plan for the UK to leave to EU is anything short of an act of national lunacy. The chaos that we are seeing now—whether over the intractable problems with the Irish border, or over the Government’s unwillingness to put anything on trade and customs issues to a vote in the House—just adds further to that impression.

Part of the problem is the Prime Minister’s inability to stand up to her Brexit extremists. Their letter demanding a hard Brexit had the added effect of reminding her that they have enough names to force a Tory leadership election. For me, that is what this business has been all about right from the start. David Cameron agreed to a referendum because he had failed to stand up to UKIP, so he dumped the Tory party’s Euro-divisions on the rest of the country. Then, as now, it was party before country. But I do not include all Conservative Members in that assessment, as I know that many share my concerns about the crazy rush to a hard Brexit because they know the catastrophic financial and economic effects that it would bring. They must make a stand and not allow their side of the House to be dominated by the minority of European Research Group fanatics who currently make all the running, and I pay tribute to those who have had the courage to do so. My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) floated the interesting suggestion that there should be a free vote on the final deal—that is quite an intriguing proposition.

Just as I do not believe that there is a majority in the House for a hard Brexit—a nasty Brexit—nor do I believe that such a majority exists in the country. We know that 48.5% of those who voted did not want any Brexit, and I cannot believe that every one of the 51.5% who voted leave did so to make the country worse off as a result of a harsh and nasty Brexit—and make us worse off it will, as every single one of the Government’s own sectoral and regional analyses demonstrates. The very least we must be aiming for is a customs union, as my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), who has led the debate for the Opposition with methodical thoughtfulness and a case based on evidence, has long argued.

On the other side we have no evidence, only vague promises that everything will be just fine post Brexit and that we will simply be able to trade freely with the rest of the world. It is like promising a five-year-old rainbows and unicorns. In his speech just two weeks ago, the Secretary of State for International Trade talked vaguely about exploiting “opportunities of the future”, without really laying out what that meant. At the same time, the Government pin all their hopes on a free trade deal with Trump’s America—the same regime that has sought trade conflict with us in the automotive and aerospace sectors, and now in the steel sector.

There is abundant evidence from industry to contradict the Government’s position. We heard from Ralf Speth of Jaguar Land Rover, who said that without a customs union, JLR would be hit with additional annual costs of £1.1 billion from profits of £1.4 billion. We see PSA raising the spectre of doubt about the future of the Vauxhall plant in Ellesmere Port, which is next door to my constituency. Although I welcome the new investment by Toyota, including in the Deeside engine plant that is also next door to my constituency, the basic fact is that such investment decisions are made two to three years in advance. That decision was already made before the Brexit negotiations. I am more concerned about the words of warning from the Japanese ambassador, after his meeting with the Prime Minister, about Japanese companies having to reassess their investment in a UK without easy access to Europe.

Similarly in aerospace, Airbus needs certainty over a customs union. Flights come in and out of Chester airport several times a day, carrying parts to and from Hamburg and Toulouse. Without sensible customs arrangements, the company’s brilliant, efficient, multinational manufacturing process would be impossible. Aerospace and aviation companies also need regulatory certainty—and quickly. Again, we are already approaching the cliff edge because of long lead times. I have heard Conservative Members making the absurd suggestion that we should simply align ourselves for regulatory purposes with the United States Federal Aviation Administration, which demonstrates that, for those hard-line Brexiteers, this is all about ideology and lining up with a right-wing, Trumpist America, rather than doing what is right and best for British industry, jobs and skills.
I finish with a point that was touched on by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) regarding our relations with Russia. I am clear that I welcome the Prime Minister’s strong words today on Russia. We must be tough in standing up to Putin’s bullying, but we have to ask why Putin is attacking the UK at this time. There might be some domestic reasons, but he does seem focused on the situation here. He has already meddled in the EU referendum, and I expect more details of that to emerge in the coming months, but he knows that by isolating ourselves from the EU—from our allies who share our values and oppose his—we are weaker than we were.

I strongly support NATO and Britain’s active membership of that great alliance, but the EU is also an alliance of security. When it comes to economic as opposed to—God forbid—military conflict against an aggressor, we should be seeking the support of our allies in the EU. Now is not the time to be walking away and going it alone when we are faced with Russia’s threats. I hope that hon. Members might, in quieter moments, take the time to consider whether, in the light of Putin’s latest aggression and his meddling in our democracy, we need to reassess this whole Brexit mess as something that is not currently in the UK’s national interests. Putin’s tactics are to sow chaos through doubt, discord, confusion and disharmony. Surely even from the point of view of Brexit extremists, all of a sudden there is a greater threat to the UK and the west than the European Union—I hope that they wake up to it.

6.4 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) made a very considered speech in which he laid out in some detail the damage that Brexit will do. I do not intend to go over that ground. Rather, I want to talk specifically about the Scottish Government’s continuity Bill. It is important that the House understands precisely what the Scottish Government are doing in relation to Brexit and why they are doing it.

Before I do so, I want to comment on two things that were said earlier. First, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), who is no longer in his place, spoke about the continuity Bill in Scotland being subject to many amendments. Indeed it is—147 or so wrecking amendments from the Tories. I simply say gently to the Tories from Scotland that it would have been better if they had signed up to amendments to the UK’s EU withdrawal Bill as a bloc rather than tabling all those wrecking amendments to the Scottish legislation.

Secondly, the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) spoke about trade liberalisation—and I agree with him. At the moment, however, an American company, the Harley-Davidson motorcycle company, is telling us that Donald Trump’s tariff regime will add $30 million to its cost base. If his Administration are prepared to damage all-American businesses, it is naive in the extreme to assume that some kind of good deal will be cut for the UK.

Ross Thomson: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman agrees about trade liberalisation. Does he not agree, therefore, that as the EU is the most protectionist organisation there is, with high tariffs on imports coming into it, we will be better off out of it, so that we can help lead the world in liberalising trade?

Stewart Hosie: I know the Scottish branch of the Tory party does not like expert opinion, but the pre-Brexit Treasury leak estimates a loss of up to 10% of GDP, the post-Brexit analysis estimates an almost similar amount, and the Scottish assessment estimates a comparable amount. We are faced with a catastrophe in every circumstance, not only if we go to WTO rules. Better, I think, to fix the problem, to maximise trade, to try to stay within the customs union, and to accept the free movement of people, than to talk about unicorns and rainbows—the Brexiteers favourite slogan.

The Scottish Government’s continuity Bill prepares Scottish devolved laws for the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union. It means that the EU laws currently in force will be retained after withdrawal and that the Scottish Government will be given the tools needed to make sure that our laws keep working after withdrawal. It is a devolved version of the UK Government’s EU withdrawal Bill. I want the House to understand that the Scottish Government have not rejected out of hand the UK Government’s proposals. Their preference is to rely on the UK’s EU withdrawal Bill. But the Scottish and Welsh Governments continue to seek an agreement with the UK that would allow the necessary consent to be given. In this scenario, the Scottish Government would seek to withdraw the continuity Bill. However, the continuity Bill has to be introduced now, and it is going through the Scottish Parliament now, so that if legislative consent is not given, Scotland’s laws will still continue to work properly. That explanation is rather different from the uber-Unionist “wrecking” version that we heard from the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk.

This is important because under the UK Government’s proposed way of preparing for the EU withdrawal Bill, they acknowledge that it requires the consent of the Scottish Parliament to become law. Right now, though, neither the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government, nor, on a unanimous cross-party basis, the Scottish Parliament’s Finance and Constitution Committee agree that consent should be given. That is extremely important because, as they say, the Bill allows the UK Government to take control of devolved powers without the agreement of the Scottish Parliament. That is why both the Scottish and Welsh Governments have called it a power grab. The all-party Finance and Constitution Committee has said that it is “incompatible” with the devolution settlement in Scotland. The UK Government’s proposed changes to the EU withdrawal Bill do not yet address that. They would retain the UK Government’s ability to change the limits of devolution without the agreement of the Scottish Parliament. That is important.

In that way, the Scottish Government’s measures differ greatly from the UK Government Bill. The main difference is that the Scottish continuity Bill gives the Scottish Parliament its full role in the preparation of Scotland’s devolved laws for EU withdrawal. It gives the Scottish Parliament an enhanced role in scrutinising proposals for changes to laws as a result of withdrawal and makes some different policy choices, including retaining in law the EU charter of fundamental rights. It also contains a power to keep pace with EU law, for good reason, where appropriate, after the UK chooses to leave the EU.
Paul Masterton: The Opposition amendments to the Scottish Government’s Bill significantly water down the massive power grab attempt by Scottish Ministers in relation to continuing alignment with the EU, which I think the Scottish Government want for five years, then five years, then five years. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that those amendments to the Bill are a welcome defeat of the Scottish Government?

Stewart Hosie: When Conservatives talk about a power grab in Holyrood, it is code for defending all powers coming to London. I suspect that lots of Tories would settle for direct rule of Scotland and the abolition or dismantling of devolution completely. I am not going to fall into the trap of the hon. Gentleman’s trick question.

The question is: why are the Scottish Government introducing this legislation now? The truth is that Scotland’s agricultural support or food standards may fall away, and what they were intended. That is important.

A year down the line of these negotiations, a new list is drawn up. We have agreed that the list should be published for the sake of transparency, but we certainly do not agree to the list.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Hosie: No, I have given way twice, and there are no extra minutes left.

As my hon. Friends said earlier, we accept in principle that there may be a need for UK-wide frameworks on some matters. It is true that the Scottish and Welsh Governments have been working with the UK to investigate those issues and explore how those frameworks would work. However, it is vital to recognise and respect the way that devolution works. If it is not reserved, it is devolved. If it would normally fall under the remit of the Scottish Parliament and is currently in Europe, it must be put into the devolved institutions now. Should a UK-wide framework and joint working be required, let the UK, the Scottish, the Welsh and indeed the Northern Ireland Governments negotiate that framework.

What we simply cannot have is a power grab where the powers that the UK Government are not certain about are taken back to London, and they then decide in a very patronising way what, if anything, might be devolved in the future. It is completely unacceptable for the UK Government to rip up the devolved settlement. That, in a sense, is the consequence of the power grab.

On Thursday 8 March, the UK Government said that they had drawn up a new list of powers, including ones they say are reserved, that had not previously been shared or discussed with the Scottish or Welsh Governments. A year down the line of these negotiations, a new list is drawn up. We have agreed that the list should be published for the sake of transparency, but we certainly do not agree to the list.

John Lamont: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Hosie: No, I am not going to give way again.

The Scottish Government are being asked to sign away the Scottish Parliament’s powers with no idea how UK-wide frameworks will work, how they will be governed and how we will go from them being temporary restrictions the UK Government want to agreeing longer-term solutions.

Despite the UK Government’s promise, they failed to bring forward an amendment in the House of Commons to the flawed clause 11 of the withdrawal Bill. Those measures are going through the Lords, but of course, that does not allow proper debate in this place. However, a new amendment—the one that has been proposed—would still allow the UK Government to restrict the Scottish Parliament’s powers unilaterally through an order made in this place, and it could be done without requiring the consent of either the Scottish Parliament or the Scottish Government.

If Brexit is itself, as I believe, an unmitigated disaster, its implementation—because it has not been thought through, and there is no plan—is threatening devolution entirely. There is a lack of understanding and respect for the idea that if a power is not reserved, it is devolved. I therefore ask the Minister to return to the respect agenda: if a power is not reserved, devolve it now. The Government should stop the power grab and get on with negotiating properly with the devolved Administrations, so that the UK withdrawal Bill can actually work without threatening the powers of the other nations within the UK.

6.15 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): On 23 June 2016, the people of this country voted to leave, as did a majority of my constituents. The result was won on a narrow margin, but the result was clear, which is why I voted to trigger article 50. However, when we triggered article 50, I argued that we needed a Brexit deal that reflected the narrow margin and would bring leave and remain voters together. That is why I argued then, as I am arguing now, for an EEA-based Brexit. I will say a little more about that later.

Barely a year after that referendum, the Prime Minister called an election in which she hoped to secure a mandate for a hard Brexit, but the British people said no, so the Prime Minister saw her majority disappear. Any sensible Government would at that point have accepted and committed themselves to a sensible Brexit—one that could bridge the divide—recognising that compromises must be made if we are to secure a mutually beneficial deal from this process.

As Michel Barnier’s famous escalator slide makes clear, the Prime Minister’s red lines leave us with little choice but a Canada-based free trade arrangement. However, a Canada-based deal is about as much use as a chocolate teapot: it fails to cover services, which account for 80% of the British economy; it does nothing to resolve the issues regarding our relationship with EU agencies, just under half of which have no provision whatsoever for third-party country participation; and it leads inexorably to a hard border in Ireland.

I am sure that the Government toadies and Brextremists on the Back Benches are going to repeat ad nauseam the Prime Minister’s line about a bespoke deal, saying that all deals involve cherry-picking and so on. To do so, fundamentally misunderstands not only this process, but that of all trade negotiations, because the fact is that all trade deals are a blend of off-the-shelf and bespoke elements. The Brexit negotiations are, first, about deciding on the foundations, and the foundations have to be based on a basic template, whether an EEA, FTA or association model. Once we have agreement on the foundations, we can then move on to an argument about the doors, windows and roof of the house.
It is clear that the fundamental problem with the Government’s approach to these negotiations has been an inability to accept that we must agree such a foundational deal that sets the terms for the negotiations. It is absolutely unforgivable that, just over a week from the EU agreeing the guidelines for the future relationship phase of our negotiations, the Government are still talking about all the things that they might do—rather blue sky, vague and sufficiently inoffensive things so as not to alienate any wing of the Conservative party. That is a profound abdication of duty and responsibility on the part of the Government, because it has left a vacuum and allowed the EU to define our destiny for us.

Ever since the referendum, we have been on the back foot because the Government have utterly failed to define the terms of the debate. That leads us, inexorably and ultimately—I hope—towards the conclusion that we need an exit on the basis of an EEA-EFTA deal. A Brexit on an EEA-EFTA basis—with a customs union provision building on the protocol 10 precedent, or seeking something deeper—could provide the overarching framework for a deal that is not only achievable, but desirable for both leave and remain voters.

Moreover, an EEA-based Brexit could navigate a path around the Government’s red lines, because the EEA is not the same as the single market and must not be conflated with it. The EEA is an internal market covering much, but not all, of the single market and three of the four EFTA states. The EEA excludes fisheries and agriculture, but the key point is that the EEA is predicated on a fundamentally different legal and political purpose to that of the single market. While the EU single market is predicated on the treaty of the European Union, with its aim of “ever closer union”, the EEA internal market is based on the EEA agreement, the purpose of which is “to promote a continuous and balanced strengthening of trade and economic relations between the contracting parties”.

The fact is that the EEA is, in essence, a reversion to the European Community, based on the terms of the Single European Act 1986.

Moreover, articles 112 and 113 of the EEA agreement allow for the reform of any of the four freedoms, including the free movement of people. That has, in fact, already been done: the protocol 15 precedent enshrines a quota-based system in Lichtenstein, and it would have been available to the Swiss had they voted to join the EEA back in 1992. It would, therefore, be a lever at our disposal should we wish to join the EEA.

The EEA meets another red line, namely that of ending the jurisdiction of the ECJ. The EEA is overseen by the EFTA arbitration court, which, with UK membership, would have a plurality of UK judges. The EFTA court regularly rules in a different manner from the ECJ and frequently sets precedents that are later followed by the ECJ.

In the EEA, this House would be wholly sovereign. We would see an end to direct effect, and through the right of reservation we would possess a veto on EEA rules. What is more, EEA members have considerable rule-chasing powers through the various committees of the EU, and retain an influence on the EU position at the WTO, at which the UK possesses our own seat at the table.
am concerned about future investment in the plant. As the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee said in its report on the impact of Brexit on the automotive sector:

“It is difficult to see how it would make economic sense for multinational volume manufacturers—the bulk of the UK automotive sector—to base production in the UK in a no deal or WTO tariff scenario. The shift of manufacturing to countries within the customs union and single market will be inevitable.”

The cost to UK jobs could be in the hundreds of thousands and to inward investment in the hundreds of millions of pounds. That is another example of why many of us on the Labour Benches call on the UK to remain a member of the single market and the customs union. The same report made it explicit that the UK cannot expect an expansion of trade overseas to outweigh the loss of trade to Europe arising from a hard Brexit. It seems senseless to me to walk away from one half of the north-east’s trade without a strategic means of replacing it other than through wishful thinking.

The impact assessments the Government tried to keep to themselves reveal the potential impact on the north-east. They identify that three of the major sectors to be hit by Brexit will be the automotive, chemical and pharmaceutical sectors—all major industries in the north-east of England. The impact assessments determine that all of the regions and nations of the UK, the north-east of England will be the worst hit. This is due to the region’s strong manufacturing and industrial base, which would be exposed most to the changes and trade barriers, and because we have the greatest dependence on exports as a proportion of the regional economy.

The impact assessments say that the north-east would see a decline in its GDP by as much as 16% over 15 years. We can talk about a new customs arrangement, frictionless borders and non-divergence as much as we like, but all we will end up doing is reinventing the wheel only to discover it will not be as round as the original. It is no surprise that the north-east of England chamber of commerce issued a statement following the spring statement. Ross Smith, director of policy for the chamber, said:

“the success or otherwise of negotiations and planning for Brexit could yet render these forecasts largely irrelevant and business still have little detail to base their planning on”.

The second issue, of great strategic importance not only to the UK but Europe, is our response to Russia’s flouting of basic international law and the international rules-based systems by which the community of nations should abide. I do not think we should doubt that Russia’s intent with the continent of Europe is to divide and rule. Putin wants a weak Europe. Brexit, I believe, plays straight into his hands. Russia wants to see Europe divided, introspective and prepared, ultimately, to play the international game by his and Russia’s rule.

Bully-boy tactics are always the result of the weak. The Russian state is weak, economically no larger than Italy. Its population is ageing. Its military strength may be perceived to be great, but it lacks depth.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and colleague from the north-east for giving way. I just wanted to point out that, although the north-east voted substantially to leave, it shares his concerns about manufacturing, jobs and security.

Phil Wilson: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour. She is right. I think there is a shift in opinion now—that Brexit could damage job prospects for tens of thousands of people in the north-east of England.

Putin does not want kinetic action with NATO, but he does want us weakened, distracted and inward looking. That is why the warfare that Russia wants to adopt is hybrid. It can be social, anti-democratic and economic warfare—trying, for example, to influence democratic elections. From funding populist movements, such as Marine Le Pen’s Front National, now called National Rally, is it any wonder Nigel Farage sees Putin as one of his favourite leaders? I endorse the Prime Minister’s actions today, but the Salisbury incident is about more than just spies.

The use of a chemical weapon on the streets of a city of the UK is also an attack on the principles by which we stand and they must be defended. Members of all parties in the House must declare on which side they stand. This is about defending our way of life, which is internationally protected by a rules-based order that we need to preserve and that Russia seeks to undermine—from its indiscriminate military action in Syria, to the Ukraine and Crimea, to the boosting of its enhanced nuclear capabilities, to a failing economy run by oligarchs who use London as their plaything and to the troll farms of St Petersburg, which spread news of a dubious nature throughout Europe and the US. Russia is trying to shake our confidence in our way of life. Engage and beware, yes, but to give it the benefit of the doubt is ridiculous. It is trying to undermine liberal democracy in the west—the special relationship with the US, NATO, the UN and, dare I say it, with the EU. Those bilateral or multilateral institutions have served us well for decades.

I say to the Minister that our leaving the EU helps Putin. Putin has always resented what he sees as the belittling of Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He wants to return to a world where Russia helped to call the shots. It cannot do that now, so the next best thing is to weaken those who are sitting at the table. It interfered in the US election. It welcomes the Catalan independence movement. It supports the Front National in France. It welcomes the extreme right of Hungary’s Prime Minister and the AfD in Germany. Then, of course, there is Brexit.

Putin believes that the east has disintegrated since the Berlin wall came down. Now it is the turn of the west and he will play any game, hold any card and roll any dice to ensure that happens. Eventually, the UK, one of the most principled critics of Russia in Europe, will not have a seat at the table in the EU. That is good for Putin. Of course, we will continue to engage with the EU, but it is better to have a seat at the table than not.

Let us not forget that NATO is a military alliance, and the EU, not NATO, has the ability to impose sanctions against Russia. I agree with the findings of the Foreign Affairs Committee’s “Global Britain” report: the Prime Minister needs to come to the House to lay out what a “global Britain” actually means. Now is the time to defend ourselves as a country proportionately and offer a rallying cry for what we believe in as a country. We may have created difficulties for ourselves, but our stance today is the right one on Russia, because the whole argument comes down to values. I see myself as a real Labour man who, in the mould of Clem Attlee and Ernie Bevin, is prepared to make the difficult decisions. I think today is the time to make them.
I believe in Britain as a force for good in the world. We on both sides of the House need to stand up for the principles that underpin our way of life—democracy, human rights and the rule of law. These have been the foundations of the west for decades. We need now to stand against the forces, at home and abroad, that seek to undermine those principles.

6.32 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) gave a compelling exposition of what we have and the benefits that we enjoy within the single market and the customs union, and what we stand to lose from being outside them. I again urge the UK Government to have genuine, not token, engagement with the devolved Administrations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) pointed out why it is absolutely vital for the Scottish Parliament to bring through a continuity Bill to protect the laws of Scotland. He also highlighted the naivety over trade with the US—the hope, and the “rainbows and unicorns” that the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) spoke about—and again urged the UK Government, as I will, to engage meaningfully with the devolved Administrations. It can still be done, even at this late date.

Everybody is getting a bit frustrated by the idea that a bespoke agreement is going to be magically produced here. There is a “hit it and hope” attitude from Government Front Benchers, completely ignoring the realities of the modern world. The UK Government tell us that all will be well, and we are supposed to take it on trust that that is the case, yet through this entire process to date, they have sought to exclude Parliament. They have had to be forced to share impact assessments. They have not listened to or respected the position of the devolved Governments. In this place, we still do not have answers even about the process, never mind what the impacts will be.

As the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) mentioned, there will be a vote, but that vote in itself is a bit like Brexit: it is shrouded in confusion. How much time will there be between the publication of the final agreements and a vote in this place? Nobody knows. Will Committees be able to take evidence and publish reports on the final agreements? Nobody knows. How long will there be between the vote and exit day? Nobody knows. What additional documentation will the Government publish to accompany the agreement and declaration? Nobody knows. There are lines and lines and lines of things that to date nobody knows about this process. It is yet another Brexit boorach.

We do not have answers to these questions on the parliamentary process, never mind answers to the key questions being asked by business and constituents. That is why the Scottish Government have introduced the continuity Bill and why everyone in the Scottish Parliament, apart from the Tories, understands the need for it. It retains in domestic law the EU law currently operating in devolved areas. [Interruption.] Scottish Conservatives can chunter from their Benches, but it is clear that they are not standing up for Scotland. The Bill gives Scottish Ministers the powers needed to ensure that devolved law continues to operate effectively after the UK withdrawal, and that is a very important point, given the range of powers that so far have not been agreed to be devolved directly. These powers should go straight back to the Scottish Parliament. Just today, an Ipsos MORI poll showed that the Scottish people are unconvinced by the UK Government’s position. One in eight people in Scotland think it will damage the economy. Only one in seven think there will be any benefit.

What do we know about the economy and trade? The analysis by the Financial Times that my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife mentioned suggested that Brexit was already costing the economy £18 billion a year, or £350 million per week, as he pointed out. That is not money on the side of a bus; it is money thrown under a bus—lost to us completely. The London School of Economics estimates that Brexit has already cost the average household £404 a year as a result of the fall in sterling and the higher inflation since the vote. The UK Government’s own leaked impact assessment confirms that under all scenarios the UK will be worse off after leaving the EU and that the UK could be forced to borrow £120 billion more after Brexit between 2019 and 2033.

Leaving the EU customs union and single market would be disastrous for Scotland’s trading position. It will create barriers to trade, such as EU tariffs, customs checks, rules of origin and divergent regulatory regimes, and could impede Scottish trade with the rest of the world, as we stand to lose the benefit of 36 EU free trade agreements covering 53 markets. When the UK Government talk about trading with nations outside the EU, they should remember that those very agreements have been facilitated by our being in the EU. So there are many benefits to lose. For the food and drink sector in Scotland, we know that a hard Brexit risks access to Scotland’s biggest overseas regional food and drink export market; it risks Scottish competitiveness and increased costs for business; it risks the value and reputation of Scottish produce; and it substantially risks food production through the loss of our workforce.

We know that there is no trade without transport and that maintaining and improving physical access to European countries and allowing transport operators and service providers registered in the UK to operate across the EU, and vice versa, remains a vital component of trade. Minimising administrative arrangements for crossing borders for international freight and logistics is vital, as is access to labour. They are crucial for our transport network.

If I had more time, I would talk about what will happen to rural Scotland or the energy market if we do not get a meaningful deal, but I will finish by saying that so far we do not know what will happen about Parliament’s role. We know that the continuity Bill is a much-needed piece of legislation to protect the interests of the Scottish people and their devolution settlement. We know that the protections businesses seek and the questions they still have remain unanswered by the UK Government. We know the impacts and concerns for our economy and trade. Similarly, we know the impacts and concerns for the food and drink sector, health and social care, transport, rural Scotland and our energy market and Benches, among much more. We do not need more rhetoric from the Government about “scaremongering”. These are genuine, real concerns, and we need answers.
Will the Minister answer the questions about the parliamentary process, so that we can do our job of representing our constituents and ensure that there is a transparent and open process? Will he recognise that the Scottish Government are being asked to sign away the Scottish Parliament’s powers with no idea how UK-wide frameworks will work, how they will be governed and how we will proceed from the temporary restrictions that the UK want to agreeing longer-term solutions? In doing so, will he accept that this is not a constructive way in which to engage with the devolved Governments?

6.40 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Saturday is St Patrick’s day. Although we do not know where St Patrick was actually from, we know that he was not Irish. Captured as a slave by the pirates who roamed the Irish sea at the time, he was not entirely welcome when he returned as a free man, although he might find himself quite popular at Twickenham on Saturday.

The Bristol Post recently published an article about the Bristol merchants who, under Henry II, went to Dublin in 1171 to defend Dublin castle against the insurgency in Ireland. As a reward from Henry, they were able to establish trading posts. There is still some debate about whether the merchants still have citizenship in Dublin, or whether the arrangement has been overridden by the 1937 Irish constitution. That is something that I still intend to discuss with the Irish Government.

Because time is short, I will skip through the centuries that lie between then and now, during which people have flowed across these islands, mostly in times of conflict and often in times of great poverty and desperation, looking for work and trying to settle in various areas. A hundred years ago, we were the same country. My grandparents were born under the auspices of the Irish community, who have citizenship in Dublin, or whether the arrangement has been overridden by the 1937 Irish constitution. That is something that I still intend to discuss with the Irish Government.

Paragraph 47 of the December agreement talked about a “mapping exercise”. I have asked before in this place and in writing to the Prime Minister for that mapping exercise to be published.

We need to end the façade that there can be any kind of different customs and alignment regimes across these islands, or any unilateral change to the current provisions. From St Patrick and the Bristol merchants’ wanderings to the billions of pounds traded and movements made across these islands now, the great people of these islands expect to be able to move and trade freely, and any dilution of that will not be acceptable to any of us.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the outstanding and thought-provoking speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth); I am very glad that I was in the Chamber to hear it. At the start of my speech, may I send our best wishes to the Minister, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), who is about to embark upon the most challenging and rewarding experience of his life? It is not Brexit; he is due to have a baby—on Friday, I believe—and the thoughts of us all are with him.

This has been an interesting afternoon of speeches—not so much a debate as a collection of MPs’ thoughts on all matters Brexit-related. Excellent though the contributions have been, it seems to me that we have just taken part in what is known as displacement activity—the parliamentary equivalent of scratching one’s head when confused. Why is there no opportunity for the House to express its view in a vote? Because the Government are afraid of this Parliament and their own party.

I have now served in Parliament opposite three Governments. While none of them has been any good, obviously, none has lacked confidence like this one. As my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) said, the Tory party is utterly riven in government by the task that will define it. How we leave the European Union is the single most important question this generation of MPs is ever likely to face, yet the Government have to be forced to give us a meaningful vote on it.

There is one issue that exposes the miserable inadequacy of the Government’s leadership more than anything else: the Irish border. The Government have no clue...
about how to ensure that we have a frictionless open border in Ireland, and it is an outrage that our Prime Minister says that she is looking at the example of the border between the United States and Canada. That is one of the worst examples I can think of, so will the Minister confirm that the Prime Minister has finished looking at that particular example and ruled it out? I do hope so.

When will the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union visit the Irish border? I understand he has never been, but that is unacceptable. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South, with her excellent knowledge of all things Irish, and I would be happy to take him. The hard Brexiteers have no suggestions about how to resolve this issue; they only have red lines and outrage of epic proportions directed at anyone who dares to suggest a sensible way forward. Where is the Government’s legal text of the phase 1 agreement? The EU published its on 28 February; where is ours? The Labour party thinks we should remain in a customs union with the European Union, and there is wide support for that in industry, particularly among manufacturers. That would safeguard jobs, help to resolve the Irish border and give certainty, but the Government have rejected this option because they are buffeted by hot air from their own Back Benchers, not because they are putting the national interest first.

The Government should listen to the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) when she talks of the importance of services and non-tariff barriers. They should listen, too, when the former top civil servant at the Department for International Trade says that we are rejecting a three-course meal for a packet of crisps. He has a point, but rather than engaging in debate, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) goes around telling him to try a couple of multipacks.

We are just over a year from exit and the Government have so little to say on important issues. Precisely which areas do the Government want to diverge on and deregulate? What do the Government’s intend that the transitional period will look like? Will the European Court of Justice have jurisdiction, and on what? How will the Government ensure that there is an open border in Ireland without a customs union? Where is the immigration Bill; why is it delayed? When will the trade and customs Bills return to the House? As my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick) said, the Government are afraid of the House because they know that there is a majority in it for a customs union.

Labour’s approach would be much clearer. We respect the referendum result and accept that Britain is leaving the European Union. My constituency, like that of my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgfield (Phil Wilson), voted to leave, but we understand that our constituents did not vote to be poorer or less safe. Remaining in a customs union prevents us from trading globally is nonsense. We would negotiate a new UK-EU customs union, so that there would be no tariffs with Europe and no hard border in Northern Ireland. We would seek to negotiate having a say in the terms of any new EU trade deal.

Labour does not believe that deals with the USA or China, both of which have weaker standards and regulations, would compensate for a significant loss of trade with our trading neighbours in the EU. Nor do we believe that being part of a customs union with the EU would prevent us from trading extensively with non-EU countries. Germany’s largest trading partner is China.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, the idea that being in a customs union prevents us from trading globally is nonsense. We will never accept our NHS or any other public services being part of any trade deal with Trump’s America. As my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) said, just look at what he intends for our steel industry. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorran) said, Labour believes that powers over devolved policy areas currently exercised by the EU should go directly to the relevant devolved body unless the UK Government can make a compelling case for that power to be held at Westminster.

In all these areas, the Labour party has set out an approach to the negotiations that is pragmatic, that respects the referendum result and that puts the national interest first. How long will it be before the Government do the same? As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) said, how long will it be until the Government start to work to reunite our country? How many days of general debate do they think we need before they dare to present Parliament with an actual decision? The Government have limped along for long enough, and it is time they stopped listening to noisy bluster and pulled themselves together to secure a good deal for Britain.

6.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I thank the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) for her kind words at the start of her speech. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Trade Policy said in his opening remarks, this is a timely debate. We are approaching a crucial moment, and we must negotiate our exit from the EU while building a new and lasting relationship with it. We are ambitious about what can be achieved, as the Prime Minister set out in her Mansion House speech, and the UK is seeking the broadest and deepest possible agreement. We are making real progress. At the end of last year, we agreed key elements of our withdrawal, and we are in the process of turning that agreement into a draft legal text. This work has gone well in recent weeks, and in many areas, such as the financial settlement and codifying the chapter of the joint report on citizens’ rights, negotiations are progressing positively.

On Northern Ireland, on which the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karim Smyth) spoke so well, the UK Government remain steadfast in their commitment to the Belfast agreement, avoiding a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland and to avoiding any borders within our United Kingdom. We are working intensively to achieve our immediate goal of agreeing a
strictly time-limited implementation period by the March European Council. Both the UK and the EU have published texts on the approach to the implementation period in the withdrawal agreement, and there is significant common ground between the two sides. Some issues remain to be discussed further, however.

We have put forward practical solutions that will help to deliver a smooth exit and protect both UK and EU interests during the implementation period. An example would be the use of a joint committee to resolve any issues that arise during that period, including in relation to any new EU laws. We look forward to continuing discussions with the EU and remain confident that we will reach an agreement by the March European Council next week. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) pointed out, that is absolutely vital. Over the coming weeks and months, the UK and the EU will continue to push ahead with negotiations in all areas, with the aim of reaching a complete withdrawal agreement in October.

The Prime Minister has set out an ambitious vision for the future economic partnership that the UK is seeking with the EU. We want the broadest and deepest agreement that covers more sectors and establishes greater co-operation than any pre-existing free trade agreement. I noted the comments of right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee, that the EU has a long track record of such bespoke agreements with key partners. We have specific proposals across our economy, including in goods, services, agri-food and fisheries, and I assure my hon. Friends the Members for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) and for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) that we will be leaving the common fisheries policy when we leave the EU.

Five foundations must underpin our future trading relationship: reciprocal commitments to ensure fair and open competition that is built on trust in one another’s institutions; an independent arbitration mechanism; an ongoing dialogue with the EU, especially between regulators; an arrangement for data protection that goes beyond an adequacy agreement—my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) made that point well—and, finally and importantly, the maintenance of links between our people. A fundamental principle in our negotiating strategy for goods is that trade at the EU-UK border should be as frictionless as possible, so we are seeking a comprehensive system of mutual recognition to ensure that, as now, products need to undergo only one series of approvals in one country. That can be achieved via a commitment to ensure that the relevant UK regulatory standards remain as high as the EU’s, which will mean in practice that UK and EU standards remain substantially similar in future.

Our default position is that UK law may not necessarily be identical to EU law, but it should achieve the same outcomes. In some cases, the Parliament of the day could choose to pass an identical law. It could also decide not to achieve the same outcomes as EU law, but it would do so knowing that there would be consequences for market access. As I set out at Which? today, at the launch of its consumer charter, the UK has always played a key role in setting high standards for consumer rights, and we will continue to do so as we leave the EU. My hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury and for Chelmsford made powerful cases about the importance of trade in services, and we want an agreement that is broader than any agreed before. We do not want to discriminate against EU service providers in the UK and would not want the EU to discriminate against UK providers. That will mean, for example, limiting any new barriers to prevent firms from establishing and agreeing an appropriate labour mobility framework that enables firms and self-employed professionals to provide cross-border services, either face to face, on the phone or through the internet. We will of course also want to continue to recognise the qualifications of each other’s professionals. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) spoke so passionately about the importance of financial services to his constituency, I can assure him that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor spoke in their recent speeches of the importance of reaching an arrangement for that sector, and I fully agree.

After we have left the EU, the UK will push for the greater liberalisation of global services markets. Trade in services represents around 20% of the value of world trade, but it accounts for 45% of the value of UK exports in 2016. Services are an important and growing component of supply chains, and digital technology is continuing to make more services tradeable.

In the Prime Minister’s Mansion House speech, which the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) described as serious and detailed and the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee described as frank, she accepted that access to each other’s markets will in certain ways be less than it is now. We understand that we cannot have all the benefits of membership of the single market without all its obligations, but we seek a new balance between those benefits and obligations.

As the Prime Minister has made clear, we will be leaving the customs union. A customs union has a single external border that sets out identical tariffs for trade with the rest of the world. As international trade policy is an exclusive competence of the EU, remaining in the customs union would restrict our ability to set our own independent trade policy, and the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) described such a scenario as “deeply unattractive” and explained that a situation in which the EU could make us subject to third-country trade deals would be a disaster. By leaving the EU customs union and establishing a new and ambitious customs arrangement with the EU, we will be able to set our own independent tariff arrangements and forge new trade relationships with our partners around the world.

On security, which the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee and many other Opposition Members raised, we seek a deep and comprehensive security partnership with the EU. Our commitment to Europe’s security should be absolutely non-negotiable. As the Prime Minister said in her Mansion House speech, the job now is to get on with delivering the best outcome for the UK’s exit from the European Union, and that is what we are determined to do.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—[Mike Freer.]

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.
Banking in North Ayrshire

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

6.59 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to have secured this debate on banking in North Ayrshire, although I really wish it was not necessary. I should apologise in advance for my croaky voice as I struggle through this speech. I have been trying to secure this debate since November, when the closures of RBS branches in Kilwinning, Kilbirnie and Saltcoats were first announced. I have the fortune, or misfortune, to have secured this debate on the very week when I have lost my voice—make of that what you will.

Since November, I have spoken in three debates on bank closures, written several letters to Ross McEwan, the chief executive of RBS, and raised this matter with the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee, which has summoned the chief executive of RBS. I have also held street stalls with SNP local councillors, activists and volunteers on countless Saturdays in the affected towns since Christmas, collecting signatures for a parliamentary petition protesting against these closures, which I will be presenting in this place in the coming weeks.

The reason for all this activity is the real anger and betrayal felt by the people of Kilwinning, Saltcoats and Kilbirnie at the loss of these banks in their towns. RBS is a bank that they own via the Government—a bank bailed out from its own mistakes and mismanagement by their taxes. Now this same bank is leaving these communities without a backward glance or any sense of social responsibility towards the very communities on whose taxes the bank’s very continued existence relied.

Although many communities in Scotland will be left without a bank following the latest announcement of closures, written in my own constituency what has happened brings the total number of towns with no bank to a staggering six. The towns of Dalry, Stevenston, West Kilbride, Ardrossan and Beith no longer have a bank; should the latest round of closures go ahead, we can add Kilwinning to that list. Kilwinning will be a town of over 16,000 people with no banking facilities—it would be funny if it were not so appalling and ridiculous. I honestly do not think any other constituency in the UK has been so adversely, cruelly hit. Indeed, the banks are stampeding out of Ayrshire at an alarming—a staggering—rate.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman put his finger on the real source of the anger: people’s sense of abandonment and being left to their own devices with no other facilities on which to rely, despite the fact that the bank exists because the taxpayer made sure that it did.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her timely debate about banking in the countryside. A lot of people have problems with BT and broadband, and that denies them the opportunity to go online, if they so wish.

Patricia Gibson: Indeed. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, which go to the heart of the issue of financial inclusion, social exclusion and digital exclusion. These things have to be worked out together in some kind of organised fashion.

At one point in its history, RBS championed vowing not to close the last bank in town, but now it is twisting itself into all sorts of shapes to dissociate itself from that promise. I suppose the PR men for RBS found the appeal of that vow attractive, but now it seems that RBS is embarrassed by it and is no longer holding to it.

We have heard a little tonight about banking online. We hear about this a lot, and I accept, as we all do, that many people now choose to bank online. There is no dispute about that. If it suits the lifestyle and needs of those who choose to bank online, good luck to them, but many do not bank online, for a variety of reasons. As the hon. Gentleman said, many choose not to do so because they are digitally excluded; this is a choice that they are not able to make.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The hon. Lady raised a very interesting point, because there is an issue with broadband, particularly in the countryside. A lot of people have problems with BT and broadband, and that denies people the opportunity to go online, if they so wish.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about that. The banks talk about online banking as though it is a choice, but for many people it is not a choice, as they are digitally excluded. Many people may not be digitally excluded but may simply decide that online banking is not for them, for whatever reason. For the record, I put myself in that category, as I choose not to bank online. The point is that it should be up to the customer to choose how and when they bank, and it is not up to the banks to make that decision for us.

But what we have now is a situation where the banks have decided, most cynically, that those of us who have chosen not to bank online must be herded into that particular pen, despite our will.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I congratulate and commend my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on the way she is strongly presenting her argument.
Will she comment on the strength of feeling in North Ayrshire about the footfall figures that have been released—or have not been released—by RBS on the branches there? There is certainly a feeling in Airdrie, where RBS is trying to close one of my local branches, that it has not provided sufficient or accurate information on the justification for those closures, which is very concerning.

Patricia Gibson: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct about that. We all know, as we have all seen in our own constituencies, the jiggery-pokery that has taken place in the presentation of these figures, which do not reveal—all sorts of nefarious goings on as to how these figures are presented. [Interruption.] I am hoping that this is the first time “jiggery-pokery” will appear in Hansard.

Mr Speaker: I have heard the term used previously by the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg).

Patricia Gibson: Thank you for that clarification, Mr Speaker. We do know that there has been jiggery-pokery and all sorts of nefarious goings on as to how these figures are presented. [HON. MEMBERS: “Sleekit.”] My colleagues are shouting the word “sleekit” to me, which may well indeed cover the particular practice that is going on. The point is that it is not right for customers to be herded into the pen of online banking, a place where they have up to this point chosen not to go or have been unable to go. We are being forced down this road by banks as they shut up shop. If we insist that we do not want to bank online, the attitude we see from too many banks, including in conversations I have had with banking officials, who shall remain nameless, is that they collectively shrug their shoulders and more or less say, “Suit yourselves, but we are still shutting your bank.”

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady on several counts. I thank her for securing the debate, for the good work that she and her fellow councillors have done in her constituency to hold RBS to account and for using the word “jookery-pawkrie”—the “jiggery-pokery” that I can understand.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) Has that been in Hansard? [Laughter.]

Bill Grant: I am left-handed and I am from a different party as well. Will the hon. Lady join me in expressing dismay that none of the 10 banks that was given that reprieve was from Ayrshire? Indeed, the 10-month reprieve is simply a stay of execution and it is derisory for the people of Scotland. RBS could do better for the people, who have been customers for generations. It was a world leader and it has let down the people who made it.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman is right that giving 10 banks a reprieve is not enough, and I am of course disappointed that none of them is in Ayrshire. I wish the banks that have been reprieved well, but I wish that we could add to that list the other 52 in Scotland that are earmarked for closure. If we could give a reprieve to the banks in my constituency, I am sure that we would make every effort thereafter to persuade RBS that the reprieve should be permanent. Obviously, the goal would be to save every bank, but I shall come back to that later because the Minister is looking at me with a bit of alarm.

I would throw one question out there in respect of digital exclusion. The banks are fond of telling us that we do not need to have branches and that we can bank online. I would particularly like to know what RBS’s advice would be to digitally excluded customers. Where do they go when the last RBS in their town closes? How do they access banking services?

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. RBS likes to talk about the mobile vans that are going around, one of which comes into the rural part of my constituency of Dundee West. They often stay for a very short period; they have steps to get in, so those who are infirm or disabled cannot get in; and when it is raining people often have to stand waiting for half an hour to get service, so get soaked to the skin. Does my hon. Friend agree that the people who are digitally excluded are the very people who come for that essential service?

Patricia Gibson: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. RBS has informed me that in my constituency, North Ayrshire and Arran, it will replace the branches in Kilwinning, Saltcoats and Kilbirnie with mobile banks. That is completely unsatisfactory. The mobile banks are delayed by the weather and by traffic and they are not disability compliant. Apparently, the advice is that if someone is disabled, immobile or has a mobility impairment and cannot access the mobile bank, the banking teller will come out and they can do their banking in the middle of the street. Well, that’s okay, then! It is absolutely shocking.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an extremely passionate speech. The all-party group on disability, which I chair, is going to launch an inquiry into community banking for people with disabilities and mobility problems. My constituents who have mobility problems and live in Strathaven and Lesmahagow, where RBS plans to close the banks, feel particularly let down. They feel that no appropriate services will be available.

Patricia Gibson: Indeed; I shall come in a little while to the importance of providing accessible and sustainable banking services in all our communities and for the needs of all our communities, including for those of us who cannot get to the next town because of lack of our own transport or of public transport, or because of other mobility issues.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): My hon. Friend has spoken about the impact of bank closures in rural areas, but does she agree that they also have a real impact on small businesses on the high street in outlying village areas of a cities, such as Juniper Green in my constituency, where the Royal Bank of Scotland shut its branch last year? If the auto-teller is taken away, people will drive to the supermarket to get their cash out and spend their money there, rather than in the many vibrant small businesses that exist in places such as Juniper Green in Edinburgh.
Patricia Gibson: My hon. and learned Friend leads me smoothly to my next point, although of course we are not just concerned about rural areas—Kilwinning could hardly be called a rural area, by any stretch of the imagination. Her point about the effect on small businesses is extremely important, because we all know that small businesses, which are the backbone of our communities—the lifeblood of our communities, keeping the heart of our high streets beating—work in an extremely challenging retail climate. If local businesses cannot bank their takings at the end of the business day, they incur additional insurance costs. They can either take their cash home with them at the end of the business day—because if the bank goes, there is no night safe—or they drive to the next town to bank their takings. Either way, their insurance costs go up. With businesses already struggling on the edge of survival, that could well be enough to tip several of them over the edge. For that reason, the support of banks in our towns often proves critical for small businesses. Let us not forget that, regardless of their political views, everyone in this Chamber understands the importance of small businesses to keeping our high streets alive.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I welcome this Adjournment debate because three banks are shutting down in my constituency in Chryston, Bellshill and Tannochside. Tannochside has one local bank, built by the community. When those banks opened, it was local workers who built them, and the hon. Lady is spot on about local businesses. The staff of small businesses usually have to take large sums of money, and if the alternative is to go to the post office, post offices are not equipped to take them. This is a very good subject for debate and I thank the hon. Lady for introducing it.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I now need to make some progress, because I know that the Minister is keen to respond.

As for those living in the towns affected by the closures, Kilbirnie customers have been advised that the nearest RBS following the closure of their branch is in Largs, a round trip of 18.8 miles; Saltcoats customers have been directed to Irvine, a round trip of 12.8 miles; and Kilwinning customers have also been directed to Irvine, a round trip of 6.8 miles. That is simply not good enough when one considers that many of those customers do not have access to private transport. They will be at the mercy of local public transport in all weathers. So the elderly and infirm will be left to fend for themselves as financial and social exclusion—that is what we are talking about—bites in their towns. The bank closures will mean that the affected communities no longer have access to day-to-day essential banking services. We have heard about the problems of mobile banks. They are not a solution to the problem of the closure of the last bank in town. They are a poor substitute and the people of Kilwinning, Saltcoats and Kilbirnie expect and deserve better.

Banks have shown, and are showing increasingly, that they have no sense of service to our communities. Tonight, I call on the Minister to establish an enforceable guaranteed minimum level of service provision for essential banking services, recognising the importance of continued access to banking for our communities. Surely, it is now time, given that banks are riding roughshod over our communities with no sense of service or responsibility, for a guaranteed minimum level of service provision for essential banking services to be put in place.

I know that the Prime Minister has said repeatedly that branch closures are operational matters for the banks, but that is not good enough. RBS is still almost 73% owned by the taxpayer, so this is a bitter pill to swallow. In addition, the UK Government retain all legislative and regulatory powers in respect of financial services, so the UK Government have the authority to call a halt to this devastating round of closures while banks, stakeholders and the UK and Scottish Governments consider how best to take account of the obligation to banking customers and our communities. Whatever the banks may say, they have an obligation to our communities—a service obligation, a financial obligation and a moral obligation.

The UK Government argue that these are “operational decisions” for banks, but there is a precedent, as the Minister knows, and George Osborne, the former Chancellor, let the cat out of the bag. He confirmed that during his time as Chancellor his consent was sought by RBS about the departure of the former chief executive officer, Stephen Hester. The UK Government could right now reject any RBS branch closures unless and until impact assessments have been carried out, and should require RBS to ensure that practical and sustainable alternative banking services are put in place before any closures are signed off.

It really is time to call on RBS management to reverse these planned closures. The Minister tonight has a responsibility to demonstrate that the UK Government are standing up for our communities on this most important issue. The SNP Westminster leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), has persuaded RBS to reprieve 10 branches across Scotland until impact assessments have been carried out. I wish those communities well, but it does nothing to soften the hammer blow for the towns in my constituency that face losing their banks and for Kilwinning in particular which will lose its last bank branch. In the past, the Minister has suggested that customers who are not happy can move their accounts to another bank. What does he suggest that the people of Kilwinning do, when there is no bank for them to move to within a reasonable distance?

Of course customers are also advised to move their accounts to the post office. Well, 10 years ago I recall collecting petition signatures to save post offices in my constituency when swathes of them were being closed down in my constituency under a previous Government. Post offices bolted on to the back of the local Spar simply do not provide the range of services or privacy that customers need and deserve.

I appeal in good faith to the Minister to ensure that these closures are halted—that RBS is ordered to halt these closures and carry out full impact assessments on the communities affected. All the communities affected want nothing less, and the people in the towns of Kilwinning, Kilbirnie and Saltcoats deserve nothing less. Is the Minister going to stand with RBS management, or is he going to stand with the communities affected and the communities of Kilwinning, Kilbirnie and Saltcoats in particular? I urge him to do the right thing and stand up for our communities.
7.20 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I sincerely commend the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this debate. She has once again spoken very powerfully on behalf of her constituents, and I know that she is passionate about this issue. The RBS executives will note that there are more than 20 Members of Parliament here and that a number have spoken. They will also want to reflect on the views that have been expressed.

Since becoming Economic Secretary on 9 January, I have had the privilege of responding to a number of debates on the closures of bank branches across the UK and in specific local areas. In each, I have heard important stories about what the local bank branch can mean to the community, as I have heard again this evening. It means a great deal in terms of practical access to services. I will return to that point in more detail. Banks can also be at the heart of how people feel about their local high street and the future of their community. Putting my Treasury responsibilities aside, I visited a bank in my constituency that is facing closure in exactly the same way that the hon. Lady set out. I had to sit down with the bank manager and go through the same sorts of arguments, but these are commercial decisions. I will say a little bit more about that.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: No, I am not going to give way because I have only eight and a half minutes, and I want to do justice to all the points that have been raised.

This Government are very aware of the issues. I will talk about the challenges facing the banking sector and our communities. I think that the hon. Lady has said in a previous debate that she does not bank online, and that is her choice, but whatever our personal preferences, banking is going through a period of unprecedented technological change and consumer behaviour is changing significantly. Banks are having to adapt to those shifting patterns of behaviour. The decisions that they are making are sometimes not popular and I understand why, but the hon. Lady will be well aware that those decisions are not for the Government.

The hon. Lady made a point about the former Chancellor, the former Member for Tatton, signing off on the chief executive post. There is a big difference between signing off on strategic leadership and getting involved in day-to-day commercial decisions.

Brendan O’Hara: Will the Minister give way?

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: I am not going to give way; I am just going to continue.

Each bank’s branch strategy, including whether to open or close individual branches, is for the management of that bank to determine. I understand that that is frustrating. It is frustrating to all of us who face this issue. The Government rightly do not intervene in these commercial decisions, nor do the Government manage the RBS Group. RBS is headed by its own board, which is responsible for strategic direction and management decisions. All businesses strive to deliver for their customers, but they also need to be able to plan for the future and to make changes where they are needed. These are complex commercial decisions. RBS has made its decisions in line with its commercial strategy.

Stephen Gethins: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: No, I will not.

The hon. Lady and her colleagues are entitled to ask questions, as they have done very effectively this evening, and to press RBS on its rationale. Although I do not agree that the Government should or could cancel RBS’s decisions, I am certain that the hon. Lady’s views, expressed here again this evening on behalf of her constituents, will have been heard by RBS.

I turn to the Government’s role with respect to the Post Office. The hon. Lady has previously said that the Government have “not lifted a finger” to help. I beg to differ. The Government are taking action, and I welcome the opportunity to reiterate that. For those who still need or want to bank in person, we have helped to expand and improve face-to-face banking services at the Post Office. There are 11,600 post office branches in the UK, 24 of them in the hon. Lady’s constituency. There is a post office in each of the three towns that she mentioned—Kilwinning, Kilbirnie, and Saltcoats. Indeed, across the UK, 99% of personal customers and 95% of business customers can do their day-to-day banking at the post office.

In response to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who was concerned about—

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): rose—

John Glen: I am going to response to the points raised. I have five minutes.

On the concern about small businesses and cash lodgements, RBS offers cash courier services, while the post office can accept up to £2,000 without prior notice, and further arrangements can be made on a case-by-case basis. As the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran has mentioned previously, this might not be a service that people are yet fully familiar with, but I believe that it offers a valuable alternative and that people are adjusting to the reality of what can be obtained from a post office. It is important that the people who can benefit from these services know about them, so I will keep pushing the banks and the Post Office to do more to raise awareness of the expanded services that they jointly offer. It is important that they make this case proactively and publicly. We should spread the message far and wide. We can all do our day-to-day banking at the post office. We in this House can help to reassure people who may be worried about this issue.

On the oversight of banks, where they do decide to close branches, the Government’s ongoing support for the industry’s access to banking standard is making a real difference. All the major high street banks have signed up to the standard, which commits banks to a number of outcomes when a branch closes: first, that
they will give at least three months’ notice—I think that RBS, certainly in some cases, has given six months’ notice—secondly, that they will consider what services can still be provided locally and communicate clearly with customers about alternative ways to bank; and thirdly, that they will ensure that there is support available for customers who need extra help to bank online or to access services at the local post office.

The standard is not just a list of outcomes—it has teeth, because the Lending Standards Board monitors and enforces it. It is actively monitoring how RBS Group and other banks fulfil their obligations to their customers when branches close. It has a range of tools and sanctions at its disposal should a bank fall short. I know that it is very open to talking to Members on behalf of their communities, and I encourage the hon. Lady—

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

**John Glen**: No.

I encourage the hon. Lady—and her colleagues—to talk to the board if she has concerns about the steps that RBS is taking, or not taking, in her constituency. The access to banking standard is the practical way to shape a bank’s approach to local areas. I encourage all Members in all parts of the House to ensure that their community is aware and able to engage with the bank directly.

Several Members have mentioned access to cash. The Government continue to work with industry to ensure the provision of widespread free access to cash. In December, LINK, the organisation that runs the ATM network in the UK, committed to protecting all free-to-use ATMs that are 1 km or more away from the next or nearest free-to-use ATM. This is a welcome strengthening of its financial inclusion programme, and one that I hope will reassure members across the House.

The hon. Lady fights hard for her constituents in North Ayrshire, as do a number of other Members who have spoken, and I am sure that their concerns have been heard. We all understand the frustration and disappointment caused by bank closures, but these are not Government decisions. The Government’s policy remains clear: RBS is responsible for these decisions, and RBS must defend them.

**Neil Gray**: Will the Minister give way on that point?

**John Glen**: No.

Banking is changing rapidly—we cannot deny that reality—but the Government believe that banks must support communities across the UK when their local branches close. That is a dialogue that we are all deeply engaged with in trying to find the best solution for communities. In this place, we can help to draw attention to these issues and work constructively to help our constituents to access the services they need. For my part, I will keep pushing for everyone to be able to access the banking services they need, wherever they live.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.29 pm

*House adjourned.*
Support for Farmers

The Secretary of State was asked—

Support for Farmers

1. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers after the UK leaves the EU.

2. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): We continue to work closely with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers. The Government will provide the same cash total in funds for farm support until the end of the Parliament to maintain stability for farmers as we seek to grow our world-leading food and farming industry in a sustainable way. Furthermore, the Government are currently consulting on future farming policy, seeking views on a range of possible paths to a brighter future for farming.

Chris Davies: I welcome the pledge from the Government to provide financial support for farmers in Wales, and of course in the rest of the UK, after Brexit. Does the Minister agree that this commitment will provide the stability to allow farmers to continue providing high-quality produce, without having a negative effect on the environment?

Mr Baker: I agree. British food enjoys a reputation for quality that has been built on high animal welfare standards and strong environmental protections. The Government’s proposals will support farmers to continue providing high-quality produce, without having a negative effect on the environment.

Craig Tracey: Recently I met local National Farmers Union farmers in my constituency who are frustrated by the complexity of and frequent delays in the EU’s basic payment scheme. When working with the Environment Secretary, will the Minister encourage a simpler system that will see farmers paid on time once we leave the EU?

Mr Baker: Yes, we will give such encouragement. I know that my colleague the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has listened to concerns and is consulting on arrangements to simplify and improve the delivery of the common agricultural policy while we continue to participate in it. Outside the CAP, with a system based on simpler and more effective rules, we will be able to support farmers to grow more, sell more and export more great British food.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Why will the Minister not respect the desire of NFU Scotland to have the powers on agriculture devolved in full and then for a UK framework to be developed?

Mr Baker: Of course we are listening, and in the run-up to the March European Council we very much have the concerns of the devolved Governments in mind, but we must ensure that the internal market of the United Kingdom continues to function. We will go forward with those two tensions in mind.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Stafford constituency has one of the largest areas for growing soft fruit, and indeed lettuces, in the country, meaning that we have less reliance on imports. However, those involved are very concerned about the great workers who come to harvest those crops. What assurances will the Minister give me that he is working together with his counterparts in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to make sure that the supply of people to harvest those crops is still available after we leave?

Mr Baker: We have commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to give us advice on migration policy. As we have always said, this vote was not a vote to pull up the drawbridge, and we will ensure that policy reflects the needs of the United Kingdom’s economy, particularly the sector my hon. Friend mentioned.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) was wittering about strawberries in December, or something of that sort. Anyway, we look forward to hearing his views with force and eloquence later in our exchanges.

Exit Negotiations

2. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What recent progress has been made on negotiating the terms on which the UK will leave the EU.
4. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent progress he has made in negotiations on the UK leaving the EU.

5. **Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): What recent progress he has made in negotiations on the UK leaving the EU.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): Before I answer, may I take this opportunity to express my condolences to the family of Warren Hawksley, an erstwhile colleague of ours? He was a Maastricht rebel and a great friend of mine; he was very highly principled and very energetic—sometimes too energetic—in pursuit of his views, but, as I say, I express my condolences to his family.

Our immediate goal is to agree a strictly time-limited implementation period by the March European Council next week. This is crucial to helping us build a bridge from where we are to where we want to be on our exit. We have also been working hard to codify the joint report into legal text. We are confident that both of these aims are within reach. Finally, the March European Council is expected to issue the negotiating guidelines to the Commission to negotiate the future partnership. We are seeking to ensure that those guidelines are as broad and open as possible to allow the most constructive negotiation to deliver the close relationship we are aiming for.

Sir Desmond Swayne: It could be the making of us, couldn't it?

Mr Davis: I could be just as pithy as my right hon. Friend and say yes.

Patrick Grady: Does the right hon. Gentleman foresee a scenario in which the deal negotiated is so mind-bogglingly positive that all the other European Union states want that kind of relationship as well, and the European Union itself implodes? Or does he accept that membership is the best possible relationship we can have with the European Union, so any new settlement will be disadvantageous compared with what we have now?

Mr Davis: Those who made a decision on the last part of the hon. Gentleman’s question were the British people—17.5 million of them—and they decided that that was not the case. Let me respond to the first part of his question, however, because he does have a serious point. Certainly in the institutions of the European Union, and in some member states, there are concerns that if we are too successful that will be tempting to others. I do not believe that that is a real fear, because we have unique circumstances—the English language, our historic traditions, our world network, our island status, our law—that other countries do not have. That is no fault of their own; they just do not have those advantages. That is what will allow us to make the best of this situation.

Stephen Gethins: I am aware that some in the right hon. Gentleman’s party have accused others in that party of fantasy politics. Does he believe that any transition period can be based on World Trade Organisation principles?

Mr Davis: It is fascinating to have a lecture from the SNP on fantasy politics. We are proposing a transition period based on existing arrangements and rules, so that the British people and companies—and, indeed, European people and companies—have only one transition to make.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It was disappointing to see the aggressive line in last week’s EU document on maintaining full access to our fishing waters. Will the Secretary of State assure me that the Department is being robust on behalf of my Northumbrian fishermen in any negotiations, to ensure that we regain control of our fishing waters before deciding whom to allow to fish in them?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right, and it was a very odd linkage to make. The simple truth is that when we leave the European Union we will be an independent coastal state, and as a result we will control our own waters. As stated in DEFRA questions last week, we will continue negotiations with neighbouring states about catch—because fish move—quotas, and all the rest of it. However, we will control our own destiny.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The UK is party to around 40 trade agreements negotiated by the EU, but at least two of those countries have indicated that they will seek concessions from the United Kingdom in return for rolling over those agreements during the transition period. Will the Secretary of State assure UK exporters that they will be able to continue to trade with those countries on the same basis as now and with the exact same benefits, and that we will not end up in a situation where those countries will have preferential access to our market, while UK businesses lose the same access to their markets?

Mr Davis: The right hon. Gentleman’s stance is fascinating, because the customs union proposal that the Labour party recently came up with induces exactly the risk that people will have access to our markets without our necessarily having complementary access to theirs. Indeed, that was the view espoused by the shadow Secretary of State for International Trade not long ago.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I wish my right hon. Friend every success in the negotiations which, as he said, will reach an important stage next week. Will he confirm that it remains the Government’s position that no deal is better than a bad deal, and that all necessary resources—financial and otherwise—will continue to be deployed with an eye to such an eventuality?

Mr Davis: Yes, and interestingly my right hon. Friend’s question links to that asked by the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) about whether some people on the continent think that letting us get a good deal would be a bad thing for the future of the European Union. Were people to turn that into a punishment deal, plainly no deal would be better than that. We are, of course, allocating the necessary resources, as the Chancellor has said.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Secretary of State backs a 21-month transition period. Given that the Government’s own impact assessment points to every sector and region of the UK being damaged by Brexit, what discussions has he had with
different sectors about the extra damage that a short, 21-month transition period could inflict on jobs here? Which sectors or companies have told him that a 21-month transition period is acceptable—the CBI, for example, which called for a three-year transition period, or the EEF, which called for at least two years?

Mr Davis: The first thing I would say is that there is no official Government document that makes that forecast. There is work in progress, but that is not an official Government forecast—indeed, we do not believe it. The simple truth is that, first off, the most important priority is to establish an implementation period as soon as possible, so that companies can have certainty. That is the view of the CBI, the British Chambers of Commerce, the Institute of Directors and pretty much every other business group there is.

Northern Ireland/Republic of Ireland Border

3. Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What steps he is taking to ensure that there are no border controls between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland after the UK leaves the EU.

Suella Fernandes: I am certain my hon. Friend has seen the paper “Smart Border 2.0”, which was prepared for the European Parliament’s constitutional affairs committee. It does not provide the whole solution, but it does show how technology will help to solve this problem. Does she agree that this will solve it and ensure the integrity of the United Kingdom?

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am certain my hon. Friend has seen the paper “Smart Border 2.0”, which was prepared for the European Parliament’s constitutional affairs committee. It does not provide the whole solution, but it does show how technology will help to solve this problem. Does she agree that this will solve it and ensure the integrity of the United Kingdom?

Suella Fernandes: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The report to which he refers is an interesting document, but it does not go as far as the commitment made by the United Kingdom. Our unwavering commitment is to not introduce any physical infrastructure at the border. We have explicitly ruled that out. The report is interesting, but it does not go all the way.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): May I make a plea to the Minister to recognise that this is about much more than just the movement of goods or services? This is about a cultural issue and the movement of people—it is about all of that. The symbolism is enormous and the Minister needs to ensure that that is recognised, time after time in all the talks she has, to reassure the people of both parts of Ireland.

Suella Fernandes: The common travel agreement is absolutely fundamental to any future arrangement, ensuring and enabling the free flow of people across the border. It is vital that that forms part of any future arrangement.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I do not think that Ministers quite appreciate the level of concern across the House on this issue. Whenever I have visited the Irish border, I have come face to face with the reality of what the installation of any cameras or any infrastructure would mean. It would not last a day, Minister; it would not last a day. Why will the Secretary of State not even visit the border, so that he can appreciate why people are so concerned? I do not know whether she has been, but will she encourage the Secretary of State to do so?

Suella Fernandes: We do not underestimate the importance of this issue. My fellow Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), has been to the border and engaged regularly with Members from Northern Ireland and those involved in this issue. The Secretary of State has also been to the border, prior to his appointment to this position, and is very much apprised of the sensitivities and importance of this critical issue.

Jenny Chapman: I think that says all we need to hear. What we want to know is how can we ensure an open border without a customs union? We have looked everywhere we can think of to identify a border anywhere on earth that is open and has no customs union. The Prime Minister referred to the border between the United States and Canada. Can the Minister confirm that the Prime Minister has ruled that out as an option, and can she tell us where on earth there is a border that is open with no customs union?

Suella Fernandes: The hon. Lady really needs to go back and listen to what the Prime Minister said at Mansion House. She spent a lot of time looking at this
issue and is very much interested in finding solutions. There are many proposals on the table that would be viable and workable, and the Government are in the process of considering them. A trusted trader scheme, exemptions, authorised economic operator arrangements—all these options are on the table and are subject to the negotiations.

Support for Manufacturers

6. Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for manufacturers after the UK leaves the EU.  

15. Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for manufacturers after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): This is, of course, a topic of frequent interest. Leaving the EU allows us to consider how our economy is shaped and presents an opportunity to deliver a pro-competitive, pro-innovation industrial strategy that builds on our strengths, provides certainty and stands the test of time, so that we have a resilient economy, ready for the future.

Nic Dakin: To ensure that trade is fair as well as free, there are over 40 defence instruments in place regarding steel at the European level. The behaviour of the US Administration at the moment may well mean that increases. Can the Minister give confidence to the steel industry that these trade defence instruments will remain in place at the point of moving out of the European Union?

Mr Baker: This Government are very disappointed by the President’s intention to place tariffs on steel and aluminium. The UK fully supports open and free trade and measures to tackle unfair trade practices. As part of the preparations for the UK’s exit from the EU, we are committed to creating a trade remedies framework that is able to react efficiently and effectively. When the UK leaves the EU, we will remain a member of the World Trade Organisation. We will play a full part in promoting compliance with the rules-based trading system and, if necessary, make use of the WTO’s dispute resolution procedures in defence of our national interest.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): If China is illegally dumping steel in the United Kingdom, will the excellent Minister agree that it is better that the British Government decide what the remedy is, rather than the European Union?

Mr Baker: I certainly agree that we should have our own trade policies in place and that we should not be standing against free trade. We should be unequivocally embracing free trade, but we must stand against unfair, anti-competitive practices, and that is what we will do.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): If the Secretary of State and the Government will not consider the customs union, what specific support will they give to the aerospace sector, which employs so many people in Bristol?

Mr Baker: I have good news for the hon. Lady. Both sides have agreed in principle that we should have a free trade agreement covering all sectors with zero tariffs. We believe that with a good-quality customs agreement we can achieve near-frictionless trade, and I believe that, taken together, those arrangements will ensure that our manufacturing industries, including aerospace, will have an ever brighter future.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The EEF—the voice of UK manufacturing and engineering—as well as ADS Group Limited, the CBI, the Institute of Directors and trade unions welcome Labour’s call for the negotiation of a comprehensive new UK-EU customs union post Brexit. Can the Minister name any significant manufacturing organisation or association that is on record as stating that either of the Government’s two customs propositions, set out in their future partnership paper in August last year, is remotely credible or workable?

Mr Baker: I remind the hon. Gentleman that his hon. Friend the Member for Brent North said that remaining in a customs union would be a “disaster”. What we need to do is stand up for the consumer interest, and that means taking control of our tariff policies while ensuring free and frictionless trade.

Erasmus plus Programme

7. Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): What discussions he has had in negotiations on the UK leaving the EU on continuing UK participation in the Erasmus+ programme.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): We have committed ourselves to continued UK participation in the Erasmus+
programme until 2020, and we welcome the opportunity to give clarity to young people as well as the youth and education sectors. While no decisions have yet been made about the post-2020 participation, since the scope of that programme has not been agreed, the Prime Minister said in her recent speech that the Government would seek an ongoing relationship in respect of “educational and cultural programmes, to promote our shared values and enhance our intellectual strength in the world”.

Andrew Lewer: Is the Department liaising with the European Parliament’s Committee on Culture and Education and its Chair, Petra Kammerer, and the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture to discuss how Erasmus+ applications that are submitted before the Brexit date will be implemented?

Mr Walker: I recognise my hon. Friend’s considerable expertise when it comes to the European Parliament. Ministers from our Department regularly engage with Members of the European Parliament. We have also met members of the Committee on Culture and Education to discuss a range of EU exit issues, and we will continue to seek opportunities to meet them. The Department for Education is the lead Department for Erasmus+ policy, and its officials are in regular touch with the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Scotland has benefited from £64.8 million of funding for 658 projects since 2014. Coming out of Erasmus+ will mean not only a loss of money, but a loss of opportunity for young people in Scotland. How does the Minister intend to replace that?

Mr Walker: In her Mansion House speech, the Prime Minister said: “There are many...areas where the UK and EU economies are closely linked—including education and culture.”

It is clear that we have an ambition to discuss potential future participation in those areas; and, of course, the UK has a wide range of international programmes, which we can consider how to extend in the years to come.

Implementation Period

8. Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits for the economies of the UK and the EU of an implementation period after the UK leaves the EU.

Mr Clarke: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer and for his visit to Teesport earlier this year, which was much appreciated. Two thirds of people in my constituency voted for Brexit. Can my right hon. Friend reassure them that any implementation period will indeed be time-limited and handled in a way that will provide for a smooth exit for business?

Mr Davis: Yes. A time-limited implementation period will ensure a smooth and orderly exit from the European Union. During the period, the United Kingdom and the European Union will continue to have access to each other’s markets on current terms by replicating the effects of the customs union and the single market, and businesses will be able to continue to operate on the same terms as now. That will provide vital certainty and stability as we move towards our future partnership.

Let us be clear: we are leaving the European Union on 29 March 2019, and only when the United Kingdom is no longer a member state will we be able to take advantage of our status as an independent trading nation.

Manufacturing

10. Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the manufacturing sector; and if he will make a statement.

Mr Sheerman: Why does the Secretary of State not stand at the Dispatch Box and tell him that Unilever has today shown its long-term commitment to the UK and will indeed be investing £1 billion in our country?

Mr Sheerman: I am especially encouraged by the Chancellor’s spring statement, which confirmed that the manufacturing sector is experiencing its longest unbroken run of growth for 50 years.

Mr Sheerman: Why, every time there is a manufacturing question, does the Secretary of State hide behind his junior team? That is the fact of the matter: he does not want to confront manufacturing. Is it not the truth that there is a secret document in the Business Department that shows that, post Brexit, London will survive and thrive but the rest of the country—the north of England, manufacturing—will be in dire straits? That is the truth. Why does the Secretary of State not stand at the Dispatch Box and defend manufacturing?

Mr Baker: I lament the hon. Gentleman’s continual determination to talk down this country. I am happy to tell him that Unilever has today shown its long-term commitment to the UK and will indeed be investing £1 billion in our country.
commitment to the UK by choosing to locate its two fastest-growing global business divisions in this country, safeguarding 7,300 jobs and £1 billion a year of investment. As the company has made clear, its decision to transfer a small number of jobs to a corporate headquarters in the Netherlands is part of its long-term restructuring and is not connected to the UK’s departure from the EU.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): On the basis that it is subject to negotiation, the Government have refused to implement the agreed replacement to the regime for the inadequate 2004 clinical trial directive. This is essential for our pharmaceutical trade, because we face going off a cliff edge and not being able to participate in collaborative clinical trials with EU research institutions, so when is the Minister going to implement that replacement directive?

**Mr Baker**: As part of exit negotiations, the Government will discuss with the EU and member states how best to continue co-operation in the field of clinical trials. The UK has been working towards implementation of the new European clinical trials regulation since it was agreed in 2014. The application date of the CTR across the EU will be set by the European Commission, and if it is after our exit from the EU, it will not be part of the withdrawal Bill.

**Customs Union and Free Trade Agreements**

11. **Mr Alister Jack** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): What assessment has he made of the effect of remaining in the EU customs union on the ability of the UK to seek free trade agreements with non-EU countries. [904388]

16. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What assessment has he made of the effect of remaining in the EU customs union on the ability of the UK to seek free trade agreements with non-EU countries. [904394]

19. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What assessment has he made of the effect of remaining in the EU customs union on the ability of the UK to seek free trade agreements with non-EU countries. [904398]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Fernandes)**: It has been the clear commitment of this Government that during the implementation period we will be able to take concrete steps forward in negotiating and signing new free trade agreements with countries outside the EU, although of course they would not come into force until after the end of the implementation period. My hon. Friend is right that leaving the customs union and forging a new trade policy is a chance to open up to British businesses new markets that they have not previously had access to. That will help consumers, increase investment and only lead to prosperity.

**Bob Blackman**: I thank my hon. Friend for her answers. India represents a great opportunity in trade for Britain and British consumers and for our Indian counterparts. It is no coincidence that the Prime Minister made a point of visiting India early on in her premiership. The Department for International Trade has recently completed a trade audit with India to look at the particular barriers, and the joint economic and trade committee has decided to look at four sectors—food, life sciences, IT and services—to see where opportunities can be explored.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): At a recent meeting in this place, the director general of the CBI highlighted that Germany sells 4.7 times more to China than the UK does. Therefore, being in a customs union does not prevent countries from extending trade with global partners. Does the Minister agree with her?

**Suella Fernandes**: Well, being in the customs union also puts up prices for consumers in food, footwear and clothes. I am often surprised that the Opposition do not champion the benefits of leaving the customs union, which this Government are doing.

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I do not often cite the International Trade Secretary favourably, but he was right when he was in China with the Prime Minister in February and accepted that a customs union with the EU “self-evidently” does not prevent us from increasing bilateral trade with countries such as China. What assessment have the Government made of the comparative benefits for the UK of being in a customs union and not being in a customs union when it comes to trade with non-EU countries?
**Suella Fernandes:** As we have a trade deficit with the EU that is increasing—it is currently £70 billion—and a trade surplus with the rest of the world that is growing, our prospects for increased demand clearly come from the rest of the world, where some of the fastest-growing economies lie. Our future prosperity lies with trade both with the EU but, very importantly, with countries outside the EU.

**Common Policy Frameworks: Devolved Administrations**

13. **Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): What discussions he has had with the devolved Administrations on mechanisms to agree common policy frameworks as the UK leaves the EU.  

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** The UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments have agreed a set of principles for how we approach the creation of common frameworks. We have made significant progress together over the past few months in our intensive discussions and analysis of what future frameworks should look like. The discussions have been guided by the principles agreed in October and report to the Joint Ministerial Committee on EU negotiations, which the Northern Ireland civil service also attends. I am sure that my hon. Friend will welcome the substantial amendment that we have tabled to clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, under which the vast majority of powers returning from Brussels will flow directly to the devolved Administrations by default.

**Stephen Kerr:** I do indeed welcome the amendment to the clause 11 that has appeared in the other place, and I am grateful for this opportunity to agree with my hon. Friend. Will he assure the House that Brexit, far from undermining the devolution settlement, will in fact lead to a significant increase in decision-making powers in Holyrood and the other devolved Administrations?

**Mr Walker:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He has pressed us hard on this issue already. The analysis that we published last Friday shows that we are looking at legislative frameworks only in a small minority of areas, and legislation may be required only in relation to a few specific elements. In Scotland, our current analysis indicates that 83 out of 107 powers returning from Brussels will pass directly to Edinburgh on exit. Similarly, the majority of powers for Wales and Northern Ireland will flow directly to Cardiff and Belfast.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is interesting that it took the Government six months to come up with a single amendment to a Bill that threatens to destroy the devolution settlement, but their colleagues in the Scottish Tory party took less than a week to come up with 100 wrecking amendments to a Bill designed to protect the settlement.

Given that the question was about the mechanisms to agree common policy frameworks, will the Minister clarify what the procedure will be if the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill goes through with the Government’s amendment to clause 11? Does the amendment guarantee that common policy frameworks must be agreed by all four nations working as a partnership of equals, or does it still give the UK Government the power to impose the frameworks against the will of the devolved nations?

**Mr Walker:** I am glad that the hon. Gentleman congratulates our Scottish colleagues on their work rate. We are, of course, still seeking consent for the Bill, and discussions to achieve that continue. The UK Government have responsibility for protecting the UK’s common market. We cannot have our ability to take action restricted, so we do not think it right for any devolved Administration effectively to have a veto on common frameworks. The UK and the devolved Administrations have always been clear that we will need common frameworks once we leave the EU to make it simple for businesses from different parts of the UK to trade with each other and to help the UK to fulfil its international obligations. The conversation is ongoing, and we will continue to work with the devolved Administrations to secure an outcome that is in the best interests of every part of the UK.

**Suzanne Evans** (Stirling) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that farmers can continue to access EU markets after the UK leaves the EU.

**Mr Walker:** The Government have responsibility for protecting the UK’s interests of every part of the UK.

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Yesterday, following the JMCEN, the First Minister of Scotland said of the Scottish Government: “We can’t have our powers restricted or reduced”.

Does my hon. Friend recognise the irony in that, given that the only people who are willing to reduce the powers of the Scottish Parliament are those in the SNP, whose policy continues to be that those powers should remain in Brussels instead of coming back to the United Kingdom?

**Mr Walker:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I continue to hope that we will all be able to come together to ensure that the powers of each of the devolved Administrations are increased through this process and that we will all be able to work together to secure the prosperity of the UK—Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England.

**Farmers**

14. **Mr Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that farmers can continue to access EU markets after the UK leaves the EU.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): As the Secretary of State explained in December, we want to ensure that UK producers have the maximum freedom to trade with and operate in European markets and to let European producers do the same in the UK. At the same time, we have a unique opportunity to support a thriving and self-reliant farming sector that is more competitive, productive and profitable, to protect our precious natural environment for future generations and to deliver on our manifesto commitment to provide stability for farmers as we leave the EU.

Mr Dunne: One third of British-grown lamb is exported, 90% of it to EU markets and much of it from my constituency. Can my hon. Friend reassure the House that access to these markets will continue to be friction-free and tariff-free post Brexit?

Mr Baker: I will seek to provide that reassurance. As the Prime Minister outlined in her Mansion House speech, we want a deep and special partnership with the EU that allows the freest and most frictionless possible trade in goods, so we do not want the introduction of any tariffs or quotas, and we will want to ensure open markets for each other’s products, including agricultural products. We are confident that it is in our mutual interests to agree such an FTA.

Health and Social Care Services

17. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What recent discussions has he had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the effect of the UK leaving the EU on health and social care services.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): We will continue to work closely with the Department of Health and Social Care on delivering a smooth exit that works for the health and adult social care sectors. We value the huge contribution that EU nationals make to our public services. The agreement reached in principle in December and set out in our joint report will provide EU nationals with certainty about their rights.

Dr Whitford: With the likely effects on the workforce, data sharing, health research and drug access, does the Minister not agree that there should be a formal impact assessment of the effect on the health and social care sector of leaving the EU?

Mr Baker: I remind the hon. Lady that the latest figures from NHS Digital show that there were over 3,200 more EU nationals working in the NHS in September 2017 than before the referendum result. Formal impact assessments will, of course, be produced in the normal way in connection with legislation.

UK Fishing Waters

18. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretaries of State for Defence and for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on protecting UK fishing waters from non-UK trawlers in the event of there being no UK-EU trade agreement in place when the UK leaves the common fisheries policy.

Mr Dunne: Remainers and leavers are united in the opinion that the very worst aspect of our EU membership is the common fisheries policy. When we leave the European Union, we leave the common fisheries policy. On that day, the armada of EU trawlers that have been plundering Britain’s historic fishing grounds since 1973 are not going to be happy that their best years are behind them. Will the Minister ensure that the Royal Navy has the resources it needs to protect our sovereign waters and ensure the rebirth and renaissance of the British fishing industry?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend makes a serious point, with his usual force. We hope to reach an agreement in our mutual interests but, as the Prime Minister made clear in her Mansion House speech, we are leaving the common fisheries policy, and the UK will regain control over our domestic fisheries management rules and access to our waters. On enforcement, we will strengthen our surveillance capability and make sure that the appropriate capacity is in place to patrol our waters and enforce regulations, as required. This will be underpinned by a robust approach to risk-based assessments.

Mr Speaker: Thanks to the succinctness of colleagues, we got through every question.

Topical Questions

T1. [904400] Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): In recent weeks, the Prime Minister has set out in more detail the two key pillars of our future partnership with the European Union. In Munich, she set out our clear desire to continue to work closely with our European partners on all aspects of our security policy, both internal and external. At Mansion House, she set out a clear path towards a comprehensive future economic partnership that recognises our unique starting point, our shared history and our common values, but that also respects the result of the referendum and ensures that as we leave the EU, we return control over our money, laws and borders to this House. In the coming months, we will be using the negotiations with the EU to deliver that.

Mr Dunne: Is my right hon. Friend able to reassure the House that, following next week’s EU Council meeting, the negotiations will be able to move beyond the transition arrangements?

Mr Davis: On the implementation period, we have made significant progress in a number of areas, and although negotiations are still ongoing, we are confident...
that we can reach an agreement on that next week’s EU Council. As my hon. Friend will be aware, article 50 is clear that the withdrawal agreement shall be agreed in line with the framework for the future relationship. We expect new European Union guidelines covering the negotiation of the terms of our future relationship to be agreed at the March Council, as set out by the EU in December. The Prime Minister has set out a vision of the breadth and depth of the future relationship in a number of speeches, and we hope that the EU guidelines will be sufficiently flexible to allow the EU to think creatively and imaginatively about our future partnership. Indeed, I say to him that at least half the effort in the past three months has been aimed at ensuring that we get those flexible, open and broad guidelines by addressing that very issue with the 27 that make up the Council, as well as the Commission.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): In January last year, the Secretary of State stood at the Dispatch Box and assured the House:

“What we have come up with...is the idea of a comprehensive free trade agreement and a comprehensive customs agreement that will deliver the exact same benefits as we have”.——[Official Report, 24 January 2017; Vol. 620, c. 169.]

The Government stood by that assurance for 14 months, but then the Prime Minister’s Mansion House speech downgraded the Government’s ambitions to reduced access to European markets. What does the Secretary of State have to say for himself now?

Mr Davis: I would say two things to the right hon. and learned Gentleman. Of course, in a negotiation, we go in with the highest possible aspirations, and that is what we intended. Incidentally, he should read his own policy, which I recall has the same aspirations—not very effectively. What we are about is getting the best possible outcome for this country and that is what we will do.

Keir Starmer: We have had a lot of non-answers this morning, if I may say so, Mr Speaker. In addition to downgrading the ambition for the final deal, the Government are also delaying vital legislation in this House. We were expecting to consider the trade and customs Bill this week on Report and Third Reading but, apparently, they have been parked until May because the Government fear losing key votes. There is no sign of other vital legislation coming down the track. This should have been a busy period in Parliament. General debates on the EU are always interesting, but meaningful votes are better. What is going on?

Mr Davis: I thought that business questions came after this session, not now. However, if Opposition Members continue to try to thwart the will of the British people by blocking votes at every turn, that is their responsibility, not ours.

T2. [904401] Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with them that the UK must, on 29 March next year, leave the common fisheries policy and take back control of our waters, which means that the UK will decide annually which waters are open to fishing?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. As the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes), said earlier, that is one of the great prizes that will come out of our departure from the Union. Indeed, I am rather sorry that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) did not raise the issue of a customs union explicitly. I know that he has difficulties with his own leadership on these matters, so I thought I should find a leader of whom he did approve, Mr Tony Blair, who said:

“So the way I look at it is that the Labour party position is: it’s pulled up its anchor and it’s left the kind of, what looks like a safe port, but actually isn’t, of being in the same position as the Government...but they’d be very unwise to drop anchor at the customs union, because the truth is that doesn’t really resolve your problems. By the way, it doesn’t really resolve your problems in Northern Ireland, either.”

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): I have had extensive discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government about the shared prosperity fund. I have heard the hon. Lady’s point and will take it up with him.

T4. [904406] David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Last weekend, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs released a joint statement with the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Ruth Davidson, about the future of fisheries post Brexit. Does my hon. Friend agree with them that the UK must, on 29 March next year, leave the common fisheries policy and take back control of our waters, which means that the UK will decide annually which waters are open to fishing?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend has become a relentless champion of the fisheries cause, as exemplified by his speech in the Chamber yesterday. He is a doughty champion of his constituents and of the fishing cause more widely. The Government share his impatience to leave the common fisheries policy. The view of the House has been made clear in questions on fisheries today. We will take that impatience to leave the CFP forward to our negotiations. As an independent coastal state, we will have control of our exclusive economic zone, be responsible for the management of natural marine resources in that area, and be able to control and manage access to UK waters, including fisheries.

T5. [904407] Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): The Government document that the Exiting the European Union Committee released last week stated that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is “coordinating analysis of the impacts of a potential loss of 48 hour working week”. Why are the Government seeking to use Brexit as an excuse to steal workers’ rights?
Mr David Davis: I will not take the offer, I am afraid. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham, referred to my previous look at the border. The purpose then—it was around the time of or just before the Belfast agreement—was to look at the issue of smuggling. [Interruption.] That was one occasion. This is an important issue—indeed, the very last conversation I had with Martin McGuinness was about exactly this—and I will do so when the time arises. The simple truth is that this border issue is resolvable if we have a free trade agreement and, if we have a customs agreement, it is resolvable by technical means as well.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): May I applaud the Government’s practical and sensible decision regarding their intention to remain part of the European Aviation Safety Agency after Brexit? Can we expect similar sensible and practical discussions around open skies?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend can expect similar sensible discussions around open skies. I was reassured that President Tusk mentioned that aviation was one of the key things that he wishes to address.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): There are several Airbus Beluga flights every day between manufacturing sites at Hamburg and Toulouse, and Chester. That complicated manufacturing and supply chain will be put at risk unless we get regulatory certainty soon. When will we get detailed regulatory certainty on manufacturing?

Mr Baker: This is why we wish to move quickly to agree an implementation period and to discuss our future economic partnership. As we have said, we hope to be in a position to give certainty on our future relationship by the time we get to October.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I have to confess that Broxtowe does not have many fishing men or women in the constituency. Well, it has some, but their activities tend to be confined to the Beeston canal. The fisheries and agricultural policies of the European Union are important. Will the Secretary of State confirm that Norway has complete control over its agriculture and fisheries policy as a member of the European Free Trade Association and the European economic area, and a successful member of the single market?

Mr Baker: Well, yes, but, of course, it is a rule taker. Its economy is substantially different from our own and it is outside the customs union. We just need to make sure that we follow a path that suits our economy, and that is the path set out by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On what date were officials first instructed to begin drafting amendments to clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill?

Mr Robin Walker: We have been working on clause 11 of the Bill for some weeks and months; we have, of course, been discussing our approach with the devolved Administrations. It was always our ambition to achieve agreement on those amendments with the devolved Administrations.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Last week, I met the chief executive of the Hull and Humber chamber of commerce, Ian Kelly, who expressed support for the
concept of exploring free port status for the Humber ports. Is this yet another opportunity that the Government will have after Brexit?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Fernandes): With my fellow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), I was pleased to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) to discuss the issue with the local port authority from his constituency. Although this is a very interesting opportunity that flows from taking control of our trade policy, it is one of many options that the Government are considering.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I ask the Secretary of State directly whether he has seen the investigation from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy that apparently shows the disastrous effect that Brexit will have on manufacturing all over the country, but particularly in the north and the regions? Has he seen it, and, if he has, is he colluding to keep it private?

Mr David Davis: I do not recognise the document that the hon. Gentleman is talking about.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister confirm that when we leave the European Union, it will be our policy to control our fishing waters, not to give free and unfettered access, as is currently demanded by the European Union?

Mr Baker: As the Secretary of State and I have both said, we will be leaving the common fisheries policy and taking control of our waters. My experience of fishermen is that they do wish to access European markets. We need to approach the fisheries negotiation in the same constructive spirit as other aspects of our negotiations but, yes, we will be taking control of our waters.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Will the Government make it their policy to fully implement the international code of marketing of breastmilk substitutes following Brexit to protect our most vulnerable consumers from the predatory grasp of formula companies?

Mr Robin Walker: I did not quite hear the full detail of the hon. Lady’s question, but I can say that our focus on consumer protection is absolute. I spoke at the Which? conference earlier this week to show how we will put consumer rights at the heart of our approach to Brexit.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah! I have a choice between Bone and Hollobone. I call Mr Philip Hollobone.

Mr Hollobone: Does the promotion of leak-in-chief and Brexit-phobic Martin Selmayr to the EU’s top civil service post help or hinder our stance, or make no difference at all?

Mr David Davis: As a matter of diplomatic policy, we never comment on internal operations in other Governments.

Mr Speaker: We have had the Hollo; let’s have the Bone.

Mr Bone: Thank you for saving me up, Mr Speaker. Hon. Members know that we will leave this dreadful European Union superstate in 379 days, but they might not know that that will also mark the end of the Secretary of State’s grand tour of Europe. He is in a unique position to advise the British people about which countries like us and which do not so that we will know which countries to go to after we leave. Will the Secretary of State tell us the answer?

Mr Davis: I am very tempted to give my hon. Friend the list from the last three weeks, which would take about five minutes. Two things have struck me while talking to all my European opposite numbers: all of them are sad that we are going; and they all want a strong future relationship. They all want to stay our friends and allies, and that is what we will deliver.
Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

- Finance Act 2018
- Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2018
- Space Industry Act 2018
- City of London Corporation (Open Spaces) Act 2018.

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 19 March will be:

- **Monday 19 March**—Second Reading of the Secure Tenancies (Victims of Domestic Abuse) Bill [Lords] followed by general debate on Welsh affairs.
- **Tuesday 20 March**—Consideration of a business of the House motion followed by proceedings on the Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill.
- **Wednesday 21 March**—Consideration of a business of the House motion followed by proceedings on the Northern Ireland (Assembly Members, Regional Rates and Energy) Bill.
- **Thursday 22 March**—A general debate on the economy.
- **Friday 23 March**—The House will not be sitting.

The business for the week commencing 26 March will include:

- **Monday 26 March**—Second Reading of the Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Bill [Lords].

As part of this year’s celebration of the centenary of women’s suffrage, on Wednesday the Cabinet Office will be launching a campaign pack for parliamentarians to use as we visit schools in our constituencies to talk about the amazing achievements in the fight for equality.

This week is Shakespeare Week, and he has a solemn message for us in this House as we seek to stamp out bullying and harassment:

“Think’st thou that duty shall have dread to speak
When power to flattery bows?”

Let us hope that all’s well that ends well.

You might be aware, Mr Speaker, that I am a huge fan of England rugby, and we face a great challenge against Ireland on St Patrick’s Day this Saturday. I am proud of our strong United Kingdom. I would like to wish both teams a superb match, and also to wish everyone a very happy St Patrick’s Day.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us next week’s business. It is an interesting programme.

I am sure that the Leader of the House will know that the Bill to be debated next Monday consists of only one clause—actually, two clauses: the long title and the main clause. May we have the list of ministerial responsibilities, which has not yet been published? When will the debate on restoration and renewal finally be scheduled, as the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is still in the other place and is not due to come back until, possibly, May?

The shadow Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), raised a point of order after the debate on Tuesday about the Government not pressing ahead with plans to phase out childcare vouchers for the next six months. I know that the Leader of the House has said that we have to wait 12 weeks before a Minister responds. However, we now have two time limits—12 weeks and six months. Could we have a bit of clarity on this for our constituents?
Given that there is nothing scheduled after 26 March, could the Leader of the House please schedule an Opposition-day debate? Or perhaps we could have a debate on early-day motion 937, which deals with the statutory instrument abolishing nursing bursaries for postgraduate nursing students.

*That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 136) dated 5 February 2018, a copy of which was laid before this House on 6 February, be annulled.*

I have asked for this before. We thought that the Chancellor would make an announcement in the spring statement, but obviously as it was a spring statement he could not do that.

The Chancellor now describes himself as “Tiggerish”. If he has read the tweets of some of his Back Benchers, he will know that they are asking him to bounce out of the Cabinet. He may be Tiggerish about the growth forecast, but the OECD says that the UK’s economy is the slowest growing of all the G20 countries, so when he goes to Buenos Aires he will be last in the queue—and this is even before we leave the EU.

I want to share this really interesting point that the Prime Minister of Luxembourg made on the EU:

“We had a special relationship with the UK, before they were in with a lot of opt-outs and now they are out, they want a lot of opt-ins.”

I think that kind of sums up exactly where we are. I did not quite glean from the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union whether he has actually visited Brussels. Will the Leader of the House place in the Library information on whether he has, or on when he last visited? He did not say that he had visited the Northern Ireland border within this millennium. Will the Leader of the House urge him to do so? Has the Prime Minister visited the Northern Ireland border?

In yesterday’s statement on the Green Paper on the integration strategy, Walsall was mentioned. I was a bit upset that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government did not alert me to the fact that he was going to mention Walsall as one of the key areas. People in my constituency have already contacted me about this because they resent the fact that Walsall is seen as a place that is not integrated. I heard at 10 o’clock this morning that the Secretary of State was visiting my constituency. It would have been helpful if he had spoken to me and I could have shown him some decent areas.

In July 2015, I raised at business questions, from the Back Benches, the ESOL—English for speakers of other languages—mandation funding from Walsall adult community college. We had to fight to get it back. My constituent, Ray Simmonds, is now offering training courses to women in childcare and in levels 1, 2 and 3 numeracy and literacy. He struggled to get a place to hold those training courses. He tried to get Pleck library, but that has been closed, as have over 500 other libraries, 300 children’s centres, and 500 playgrounds. My Sure Start Palfrey children’s centre, which was twice rated “outstanding” by Ofsted, has been outsourced to a private company. These are the places for social cohesion.

May we have a debate on the National Audit Office report which found that councils are spending less on services and more on social care, and that Government funding has fallen by 49.1% in real terms? The report also suggests that about 15 councils will be at risk of following Northamptonshire County Council in imposing emergency controls. It is the funding of the infrastructure of local government that helps with social cohesion. It is austerity that fuels division as people think there are not enough resources to go round and blame other people who seem to be taking them. May we, then, have a debate on the National Union of Teachers and Runnymede Trust report on visible and invisible barriers to black, Asian and minority ethnic teachers, or an urgent statement on the young black boy who was tied to a tree in Bath and hit by white boys as he was called names? There is no Government strategy to tackle that.

Finally, I do not want to end on a sad note, but I am afraid I have to, in acknowledging the passing of some very eminent people who have made a major contribution to our country. Brenda Dean, from the other place, was the first female general secretary of a British trade union, having joined a trade union as a teenager. Professor Stephen Hawking was 52 years a fellow of Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge. I have read “A Brief History of Time”—I will have to read it again—and I have visited the large hadron collider at CERN and seen how scientists from all the different countries collaborate. He was also part of the litigation to stop the accountable care organisations, which recently won a cost-capping case on judicial review. In his memory, we must ensure that the UK continues the fantastic collaboration in science with the rest of Europe. He said that a publicly provided NHS was the most efficient system, and so those who say we cannot afford the NHS are wrong; we cannot afford not to have an NHS. Finally, Sir Ken Dodd. I actually saw him at the Palladium when I was younger—a long, long time ago. We hope to see his like again. We will miss not only his jokes and songs, but the image of a man wielding a feather duster.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I join the hon. Lady in her tributes to Brenda Dean, Professor Stephen Hawking and, of course, Sir Ken Dodd—what a fantastic and humorous man he was. I also join her in paying tribute to Stephen Hawking’s commitment to an NHS free at the point of delivery. That is vital. There is consensus right across the House that the NHS should be free at the point of delivery, and that will always be the case under this Government.

The hon. Lady and I have had this discussion about ministerial responsibilities a number of times. I have chased the matter, and I am told that the list will be published with the next quarterly transparency round, next Friday—so let’s hope, hey? I am on her side on this. I shall also be updating the House Commission on Monday on when we will bring forward the restoration and renewal debate, and I have been speaking with parliamentary counsel about the drafting of the Bill. We need to get it ready and bring it forward as soon as possible. Again, she and I agree on that.

On Opposition-day debates, I hope that the hon. Lady will be pleased, as I was, that we had the day’s debate on some of the statutory instruments that the Opposition had prayed against. I was delighted, as no doubt she was not, that the Government managed to win, with decent majorities, each of the votes on the statutory instruments, one of which is very important for young people in expanding the number of young people
receiving free school lunches by more than 50,000 by the time universal credit is rolled out. We had an Opposition day last week, for Plaid and the Democratic Unionist party, and others will be brought forward through the usual channels.

The hon. Lady talks about our new Tiggerish Chancellor. I was delighted to see this new Disney reference, and long may it last. She says that it is misplaced, but manufacturing output has now grown for nine consecutive months for the first time since records began in 1968; we have had the best two quarters of productivity growth since the financial crisis; we have the lowest year to date net borrowing since 2008; the number of first-time buyers is at an 11-year high; and employment is at a near record high. These are reasons to be optimistic and to believe in our fantastic economy.

I am delighted that the hon. Lady has such faith in my ability to determine where the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and the Prime Minister should go. It is very flattering of her to suggest that I can determine their travel arrangements, but I am not sure I can quite do that. She mentions the excellent work on the racial disparity audit and this Government’s determination to ensure that where there is inequality, we take strong measures to try to remove any barriers to the success of people of all races, all ethnic backgrounds and all religions in this country, so that they can progress. She mentions that her own area, Walsall, will be part of the initial pilot scheme. I welcome that, and I hope she does.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the horrifying story of a young black boy being tied to a tree. I think we all feel disgust and horror at that inappropriate and utterly awful experience, and I hope that we in this House are at all times united in stamping out any behaviour of that sort wherever we see it.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is the 346th anniversary of the declaration of indulgence by His Majesty King Charles II, which was the first attempt at allowing freedom of religion in this country—something we should all cherish. I crave your indulgence, Mr Speaker, in reporting back from the Backbench Business Committee. The Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), is unfortunately not able to be with us; he is detained with urgent business.

The Backbench Business Committee now has eight unallocated debates that need time in the Chamber. Now that the Government have taken today and next Thursday, we will lose the opportunity to debate autism and victims of surgical mesh, which are subjects that Members across the House are very keen to debate. Could the Leader of the House ensure that we get Backbench Business time for those debates as soon as possible?

On my behalf, may I ask for a debate on child sex abuse and grooming of young children, particularly those in care? I have sat on the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government for seven years. We went through the Rotherham case in great detail and are now hearing about cases across the country. It is time we had a debate in Government time on that very important issue, so that all Members can voice their views and we can hear what the Government are going to do about it.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for standing in for the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee. I absolutely hear his request for Backbench Business days. I hope he will welcome the Government’s determination to provide Government time for a debate on International Women’s Day in such an important year, which in previous years has fallen to the Backbench Business Committee to table, and a debate on Welsh affairs, which unfortunately was a Backbench Business day that was cancelled due to the appalling weather. We also have a Government debate on the economy, which I know the Committee was keen to have. We are not ignoring the interests of Back-Bench Members in any way. Yesterday and today, we have general debates on the EU, which were strong requests from Back-Bench Members right across the House.

However, I hear my hon. Friend’s specific call for debates on autism and surgical mesh. I have constituents who have suffered profoundly from health issues relating to surgical mesh, and of course, I and all hon. Members want to do everything we can to support people who suffer from autism. We will be bringing forward Backbench Business days as soon as business allows.

My hon. Friend also raises the issue of child sex abuse, which is beyond appalling. We heard this week about the appalling situation in Telford. I share his concern about that and will make representations on his behalf.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. Can I also pay my tributes to the three people mentioned—Brenda Dean, Professor Stephen Hawking and Ken Dodd? I think the best thing we could do in Ken Dodd’s memory would be to progress the cause of independence for Knotty Ash.

I also welcome national Shakespeare Week. We are all very much looking forward to our Shakespeare suppers. I was trying to think of the most appropriate thing for this Government—surely it can only be “A Comedy of Errors”, or “Is that a power grab I see before me?”

I am really surprised that the Leader of the House has not announced any debate on Russian relations. We have had two statements that have been heavily subscribed this week. There is a great deal of interest across the House, and this issue is only going to develop and get more critical. Before we rise for Easter, can she ensure that we have a debate on Russia?

Tomorrow will be a first, with two consecutive Scottish National party MPs’ private Members’ Bills being promoted by my hon. Friends the Members for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) and for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). These particularly good and worthy Bills are on reuniting refugee families and on ending the practice of unpaid internships. Will the Leader of the House do all she can to ensure that there is none of the usual awful, disruptive parliamentary practices that characterise so much of private Members’ days? Our constituents absolutely loathe such stuff, and they want those Bills to progress.

Can we have a proper debate about English votes for English laws? I think that everybody in this House knows that this is an appalling, divisive measure that
socially balkanises this place on the basis of nationality. However, I think there are people in this House who are still confused about how it applies to them. For example, my Scottish Conservative friends, determined to exercise their prime function as unquestioning Lobby fodder, rushed through the Lobby on Tuesday to vote to take free meals out of the mouths of 1 million English bairns, only to discover that the votes did not count because of the English veto in the double-majority vote. The Scottish Tory dafties turned up to have their votes discounted in person. The Scottish Tories do nothing other than ask questions of a Parliament 400 miles away that cannot answer them, which is infuriating their constituents and is primarily responsible for plummeting relations. Given the glaikit looks on their coupons the other evening, we now know why they do that.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am struggling to find something on which to agree with the hon. Gentleman—perhaps the independence of Knotty Ash would be the safest option.

The hon. Gentleman calls for a debate on Russia. The Government were extremely grateful yesterday for the very calm and supportive response of his party leader. The Government very much appreciated that sensible and measured response. I will certainly make representations and I am sure there will be opportunities for further discussion on this very serious subject.

Private Members’ Bills are, by definition, for private Members, and the Government certainly do not seek to interfere in the passage of and debates on such Bills. The hon. Gentleman mentions two very important Bills promoted by Scottish Members, one on the reunion of refugee families and the other on banning unpaid internships. Both proposals have a good deal of merit. The Government have very strong policies in each area. There was an interesting discussion on the radio this morning about the abuse of people applying for a job versus the merits of small businesses being able to check out in practical reality the skills that individuals claim to have. That debate will be useful for tomorrow’s proceedings on the Floor of the House.

The hon. Gentleman talked about English votes for English laws. I want to put on the record that it is absolutely not the case that free school dinners are being taken away from children. I deeply regret that Opposition Members, in their misrepresentation of the policy, have deliberately sought to mislead and to make vulnerable people feel yet more vulnerable. It is clear that 50,000 more children will be eligible for free school meals by the time universal credit is rolled out. It is of great regret to the Government that anyone should seek to misrepresent that.

**Mr Speaker:** I very gently say, on advice, to the hon. Gentleman that she will want to withdraw that.

**Andrea Leadsom:** Mr Speaker—

**Mr Speaker:** It is not negotiable; it just has to be withdrawn.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I withdraw it.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you.

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**Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con):** Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House find time for a debate on food labelling? I have been contacted by Diabetes UK and Compassion in World Farming, which feel very strongly that food labelling should be much clearer so that when customers buy food and drink, they can understand the effects it will have on their health and how farm animals are treated.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises an issue that is very important not just, as he says, for those with health problems, but for people who care about animal welfare to be able to see precisely how the food they are eating has been treated during its lifetime and, of course, the way it has been slaughtered. When we leave the European Union, we will no longer be subject to EU food-labelling regulations and we will be able to look at the issue as an independent United Kingdom.

**Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab):** Last Friday, I stayed out all night—sleeping rough at Huddersfield Town football stadium to raise money for local homelessness charities. We raised over £40,000 that night. Does the Leader of the House agree that we should encourage other football clubs to raise money locally in that way—perhaps, Mr Speaker, you could influence the mighty Gunners to do the same—and may we have a statement on how the Government’s plans to eradicate homelessness are going?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I congratulate the hon. Lady: that is an amazing thing to do. In my home town of Northampton, a fantastic homelessness centre does a sleep-out every year, and I am fully determined to do that myself one year. [Interruption.] Yes, exactly: I shall wrap up warm. I congratulate her and everybody involved on that amazing fundraising effort, which is excellent news.

As the hon. Lady will know, it is an absolute priority of the Government to make sure that we tackle the huge problem of homelessness and rough sleeping. We pledged in our manifesto to eliminate it by 2027, and to halve it by 2022. These are very difficult issues, and we have committed £1 billion to tackling rough sleeping and homelessness. It is not, however, just about money. We are also changing how councils approach the issue. We are implementing the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, a private Member’s Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) introduced. We are also working very closely with councils to look at what more can be done in targeted ways to tackle the problems that result in homelessness and rough sleeping.

**Mr Speaker:** I join the Leader of the House in congratulating the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), whose message to colleagues will have been heard and digested.

**Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con):** Will my right hon. Friend seek to install a sense of urgency into Departments, perhaps starting with the Department for Transport? Once again, following heavy rainfall, the line from London to Plymouth has been cut—I hope, temporarily—due to flooding in the Exeter region. There is a plan to fix it, but it is taking far too long, and my constituents are fed up about it—and so am I. Will she please help?
Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a huge champion for his constituency, and he is quite right to raise this matter. I absolutely understand his frustration and that of his constituents. If he writes to me, I will be happy to fire a very small rocket towards the Department for Transport on his behalf.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Constituents of mine bought a new biomass boiler, hoping to offset some of the cost by using the renewable heat incentive. The boiler was faultily installed, but after legal action, they got the boiler removed and their money back, and they have a new boiler installed. However, now that they have a replacement boiler, they have been told that they are no longer allowed to access the RHI, and to rub salt in the wounds, they have received a demand to pay back the £7,000 of RHI payments they had already received. May we have a debate on the RHI rules and the fact that customers trying to do the right thing by using green energy are being penalised through no fault of their own?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very important point. We want to encourage everybody to take every opportunity to reduce carbon emissions and to turn our economy green. I am delighted that the UK enjoyed the greenest year ever for electricity in 2017. I urge him to raise his very specific constituency point at Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Since Tuesday’s debate on free school meals, I have received numerous emails attacking me for taking food out of the mouths of the poorest children in my constituency. I came into politics to improve the lives of my constituents, so I find this abhorrent, and having to create rebuttals is a waste of taxpayers’ money. Hon. Members will know that no child will lose free school meals as a result of these policies. May we have a debate about the way in which statements made in the Chamber can, unfortunately, when lifted out of context by the Labour party, be used to manipulate public opinion, which ends up harming our most vulnerable constituents and achieving the opposite effect?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and she is right to raise that matter in the Chamber. No children will lose their free school dinners, and in fact there will be an increase of 50,000 in those who are eligible by the time universal credit is rolled out. You have said, Mr Speaker, that although the use of social media is broadly to be welcomed, Members should take care to ensure that the usage of selected clips of debates does not create a misleading impression about what has taken place. Unfortunately, however, your words were not heeded, and a misleading impression has been created. That is greatly to be regretted, and it does not help the integrity of this place when hon. Members deliberately seek to put out information that is incorrect—is that okay?

Mr Speaker: Yes, and I will not get drawn into arguments about policy. I stand by that statement in its entirety; it is entirely compatible and consistent with saying that people cannot excuse other Members of misleading the House. That first statement is absolutely correct: people should not use selective clips to give an incorrect, inaccurate, or erroneous account of proceedings.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): “All’s well that ends well” might not be the case for Northern Ireland—it is more a case of “Beware the Ides of March”. Will the Leader of the House make time available for a debate on the Foreign Secretary’s proposals for minimal border controls, and the impact of that on jobs and security in Northern Ireland?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that Government policy is to ensure that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and that when we leave the European Union we have a deal that works for all parts of the United Kingdom and does not seek to undermine or divide any part from any other part. When I read out next week’s business, he might have heard that there will be two days of debates pertaining to Northern Ireland, and he may wish to take the opportunity to speak in those.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): May I refer back to the use of statistics? There is nothing wrong with a good, robust argument in this place, but if the Leader of the House, or any Minister, makes an assertion about facts, they can quite properly be challenged and brought back to this place, and made to account for any inaccuracy in the use of statistics as facts. That is not the same for right hon. and hon. Members, particularly on the Opposition Benches, and it does not enhance political debate for people to assert facts, week after week, almost day after day—this is a growing problem—without any accountability in the House. Is there anything that the Leader of the House can do? On Tuesday we had to rely on Channel 4’s FactCheck. The Library is an excellent source of information, but it is imperative that we all act with veracity and integrity, and are held accountable when we make assertions.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is right. You will recall, Mr Speaker, that I raised in the Chamber the issue of a private response that I gave to a Labour Member following a question that they asked me privately, but that they then tweeted, implying that I had somehow answered something else. I personally was extremely offended by that. My right hon. Friend is right: social media clips that are deliberately misleading and ignore facts to make political points undermine our Parliament and democracy, and it simply must not happen.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): You might like to know, Mr Speaker, that I fully intended to spend the night with my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) at Huddersfield’s Premier League club’s stadium. However, while out walking on a cancer fundraiser the week before I got a terrible cold and had to withdraw from that wonderful night.

I have a serious request for the Leader of the House. Can a group of Members from all parties discuss ways in which Members could be made more accountable and transparent? When someone stands up, on any side of the House, I have become rather tired of hearing them mumble, “I refer to my entry in the Register of Interests.” That is all they say, but if one looks at the Register of Members’ Interests, some people have amazing business connections, large amounts of investment, and some own half a county and we are discussing agriculture during DEFRA questions. All we get is a little aside.
I think the House is not transparent enough, and that when someone makes a speech they should fully declare their interests.

Andrea Leadsom: Mr Speaker, I am looking at you and wondering whether this is more a matter for the Chair than it is for the Leader of the House. I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying very clearly. If he would like to write to me I would certainly be happy to take it up with the Procedure Committee to see whether this is an area we need to review.

Mr Speaker: The position is pretty clear. In a speech, a Member should declare an interest so that Members of the House are aware of it. There is no requirement to do so when asking a question. Each Member must take responsibility for his or her decision to declare. I would not want it to be thought that there is huge ambiguity about this. It may be that it takes time for some to be fully conversant with the required procedure, although that is not a problem that will afflict the hon. Gentleman as he approaches his 39th year of consecutive service in the House of Commons, but I hope people will appreciate how to go about this matter. It is certainly very important.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): This evening, I have the great pleasure of attending the 90th birthday celebrations of the Coldstream branch of the Women’s Institute. I am sure my right hon. Friend would be very welcome to join me. May we have a debate to pay tribute to the work the Women’s Institute does, not just in Scotland but across the United Kingdom, to support women and local charities?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure my hon. Friend will be warmly received by the WI. He is a great champion for his constituency. I thank him for highlighting the incredible work of the WI, which has played a unique role as the largest voluntary women’s organisation in the country. In the century since its formation during the first world war, the WI has dedicated its time to a wealth of worthy causes. I hope all those celebrating the 90th anniversary of the Coldstream branch have a very enjoyable evening with him.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Antisocial behaviour is a growing concern across my constituency. People tell me that they feel intimidated and unsafe in their homes. Please may we have a debate in Government time on the need for increased funding for our police and for statutory youth provision to act as both a deterrent and a solution to the problem of antisocial behaviour?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is right to raise the real problem of antisocial behaviour, which, while low level, can really wreck people’s lives, their enjoyment of their homes and so on. It is a very important subject. I am sure it would receive great support as a candidate for a Backbench Business debate in which Members from across the House could talk about their experiences.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Each and every week across England and Wales some 80 dogs are stolen from their owners, causing huge distress to both the owners and the animals. During this Pet Theft Awareness Week, may we have a debate on what is a growing and nasty problem?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has done a great deal to raise awareness of dog theft. It is a terrible crime. Any theft of property can be very distressing for victims, but the suffering will be much greater when it is a family pet. I commend him for raising this issue. The Government are very clear that when such a crime happens it must be reported to the police, whenever it happens, so that it can be investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice. He will know that the theft of a dog is a criminal offence under section 1 of the Theft Act 1968. We are determined to see it enforced.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My constituents are frankly baffled at the way the Government keep pulling business and not replacing it with time to solve the pressing issues of the day: homelessness, lack of funding for schools and challenges in the NHS. Will the Leader of the House work with the Government to provide either Government time or further Opposition-day time for us to debate, and hopefully try to solve, some of these pressing issues?

Andrea Leadsom: As far as I am aware, the only business the Government have pulled was in response to a request from the Opposition on Monday evening. Due to the unprecedented number of urgent questions and very important statements, such as those on bullying and harassment, and a response to the Salisbury attack, the Opposition requested that the Government pull the business that night. That is the only business that has been pulled, so I am not entirely sure what the hon. Lady is talking about.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Last Saturday, I joined the Save Rothbury Cottage Hospital campaign group on a march to highlight the anxiety and frustration that the local community presently feels as we await the outcome of the Department of Health and Social Care independent review panel’s review. Our clinical commissioning group closed down the 12-bed ward in our community hospital 18 months ago, citing underuse. The challenge of rural funding for healthcare means that we are not investing fairly in the Coquet valley, England’s most sparsely populated community. We need to reinvest in these beds for palliative and convalescent care and to give consideration to the practical difficulties and costs of rural distance and poor transport links. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time to discuss rurality funding frameworks to enable CCGs to meet the needs of patients such as my constituents, who live in the most sparsely populated community?

Mr Speaker: Nobody can accuse the hon. Lady of excluding any consideration that might be thought relevant in any way, at any time and to any degree from her interrogation of the Leader of the House.

Andrea Leadsom: Mr Speaker, I think you have highlighted beautifully what a fabulous champion my hon. Friend is for her constituents. She is right to raise the challenge of sparsely populated areas and their need for healthcare to be as good as anywhere else in the
[Andrea Leadsom]
country. I have some challenges with the local healthcare provision in a less populated area, and I appreciate fully what she is saying. I suggest that she might like to seek an Adjournment debate specifically to deal with the issues in Northumberland.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Last Friday, I was door-stepped by the entire primary 3 class at Hannover Street School, who wanted to tell me that Parliament’s use of plastic straws has doubled in three years. They are very concerned about that and would like to know what the Government and the Leader of the House are doing to tackle the issue.

Andrea Leadsom: Is it not fantastic to hear of year 3 students door-stepping the hon. Lady? I am sure she thoroughly enjoyed it. The Government are committed to tackling and reducing the use of plastics. All manner of efforts are being made, including the 5p charge for plastic bags, which has reduced the number of plastic bags in circulation by around 9 billion—an extraordinary number. There are the Government’s efforts on the blue belt around the overseas territories to try to protect those valuable marine locations from the impact of plastics. Closer to home, we know that litter very often ends up in our rivers and seas, and very much of it is plastic, so we have a new national litter strategy for England, which I was delighted to announce as the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Specifically on the hon. Lady’s point about plastic straws and their use in this place, the Administration Committee has taken this up. It is committed to reducing the use of single-use plastics, which includes plastic knives and forks as well as straws, and I can tell her that a number of hon. Members across this place have committed to a plastic-free Lent. I am sure she would like to know what the Government and the Leader of the House are doing to tackle the issue.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for the hard work and determination she has shown to deal with bullying and harassment of all kinds in Westminster. Can we please have a statement on the bullying inquiry that she has proposed this week? Can she confirm that the inquiry will not look at individual cases but will instead look at whether the Respect policy as a whole is working for staff in this place?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, and I can give him a specific reassurance: the inquiry into the bullying of House staff that I will propose to the House of Commons Commission on Monday 19 March will not be carrying out investigations into individual cases. That is exactly why I expect it to attract the Commission’s full support. There are existing avenues open to anyone wishing to raise specific grievances, and individuals coming forward will be advised to use those where they apply, but the inquiry will look at whether they are functioning properly. My ambition is to stamp out bullying and harassment of any kind in this place. That is something that I imagine every single person here will wish to support.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): May we have a statement or a debate on the dispute at universities at the moment? I have two universities in my constituency. This dispute has been dragging on for weeks, particularly in relation to pay and conditions, but more importantly, to lecturers’ pensions. May we have an update on that? Before the Leader of the House gets up to answer me, I am aware that there are Education questions on Monday, but I would rather have a proper statement to show that the matter is being taken seriously by the House.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very personally aware of this issue. My eldest son is facing his finals and, because of the picket line, has been denied the opportunity to go to his university even to use the resources, let alone to have any of the face-to-face tuition that he was due to have and for which he has paid. I am therefore extremely cross about the way in which innocent students are being punished during this dispute. I urge all parties to get together and find a resolution, so that a generation of graduates do not have to pay the price.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Two weeks ago, I raised with my right hon. Friend the non-levy apprenticeship funding for Newcastle-under-Lyme, Stafford, Shrewsbury and other colleges. The situation is becoming serious, and I believe that our young people will be let down if we do not resolve it. May I urge the Leader of the House to ensure that we have a statement or a debate as soon as possible?

Andrea Leadsom: I know that my hon. Friend is very supportive of apprenticeships. I can tell him that the contracts for the delivery of non-levy apprenticeship training were awarded on the basis of an assessment by the Education and Skills Funding Agency of information that had been supplied and that the tenders were measured against clearly set criteria. Ofsted’s rating of providers was not considered to be part of the process, as new entrants do not have an Ofsted rating and would therefore have been disadvantaged. The Government have awarded more than 700 providers contracts worth a total of £490 million to deliver apprenticeship training for non-levy payers. However, as my hon. Friend will know, those that were not successful in the non-levy procurement process can still supply apprenticeship training to levy payers directly.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): In the past week, three constituents have contacted me to express frustration about the fact that social security payments cannot be paid into their Post Office accounts. In the light of bank closures in my constituency and others, may we have a debate in Government time about the work and functions of the Post Office, so that we can resolve the issues and those payments from the Department for Work and Pensions can be paid into my constituents’ accounts?

Andrea Leadsom: When I was City Minister, I was delighted to sign the arrangement that allowed post offices to supply basic banking services for all UK banks to all personal account customers. The issue raised by the hon. Gentleman is news to me personally, but if he would like to write to me about it, I will certainly take it up with the Department.
Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I thought yesterday that the Prime Minister spoke not only for the Government but for the country over Russia, and I thought that the Leader of the Opposition was an apologist for Russia. The duty of every Member of Parliament is to put country first and party second. I congratulate the 18 Labour Members who supported the Government by signing early-day motion 1071, which states:

[That this House unequivocally accepts the Russian state's culpability for the poisoning of Yulia and Sergei Skripal in Salisbury using the illegal novichok nerve agent; fully supports the statement made by the Prime Minister on 14 March 2018 in response to Russia's illegal attack on the UK; further supports the Government's sanctions against Russia resulting from this incident thus far, including the expulsion of 23 Russian diplomats; supports the decision not to send Government ministers or members of the Royal family to Russia until further notice; supports the Government's call for a special meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss Russia's use of chemical weapons on UK soil; and resolves to consider support for further proportionate actions to deter future acts of aggression by the Russian state.]

On this occasion, would it be possible for the Leader of the House to arrange for the early-day motion to be debated next week?

Andrea Leadsom: I entirely associate myself with my hon. Friend's comments, and I will certainly refer them to the Government. There cannot be a debate, because the business for next week has already been arranged, but I encourage my hon. Friend to seek other means for the matter to be debated.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The deregulation of buses has been disastrous for many of our towns and villages. It has been confirmed that services 8 and 19, operated by Mc Gill's, will cease in 11 days' time, and as a result there will no longer be a direct bus route to Paisley from villages such as Bridge of Weir, Houston and Brookfield. I look forward to the Scottish Government's transport Bill, which I hope will deal with many of these issues, but may we have a debate on the impact on communities throughout the United Kingdom of the erosion of lifeline bus services since deregulation?

Andrea Leadsom: That is clearly an important point. Bus services are vital to many rural communities, enabling people to travel to work and to education centres, or simply to go and do the weekly shop. I am a huge fan of the bus sector, and I appreciate the importance of maintaining services. However, the hon. Gentleman has raised what I believe is an entirely devolved matter, so it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the specifics.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Following incidents at the Presidents Club dinner, there was significant media scrutiny and a related urgent question in the House to highlight justified concerns. Meanwhile minimal attention has been given to the events in Telford, where hundreds of children have been abused and raped. May we have a debate on the priorities and values of our broadcast media?

Andrea Leadsom: As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said yesterday, we have all been shocked by the horrific reports in Telford, where some of our most vulnerable citizens have been preyed upon by terrible criminals, and we should all be praising my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan), who has been totally right to speak out as she has. I am very pleased that the authorities are now going to conduct an inquiry, and it is important that this work gets under way as quickly as possible, so we can get to the truth. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) raises an important point about the relative lack of reporting on this subject versus other perhaps more gossipy types of scandal, and he is right to raise the concern about even-handed reporting.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The Leader of the House might have noticed that I have asked on several occasions for debates on youth violence and its root causes, and I have noted that we have not secured Government time for them. She often gives creative suggestions about how we might go about securing debates. One way we could do that is by having an Opposition day debate, and perhaps I could lobby our Front Benchers to discuss youth violence in an Opposition day debate, so please may we have time for Opposition day debates?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her work in this area. She is supporting the Government in looking into such serious violence and will be aware that the Government's new serious violence strategy is due to be published in the spring. It will look at ways to steer young people away from a life of crime, while putting in place measures to prevent and reduce the effect on victims of serious crime. She asked for an Opposition day and I can assure her, as I assured the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), that Opposition days will be forthcoming in the usual way and in accordance with the Standing Orders of this House.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I am sure the whole House will be delighted to hear that Wales's first zero-waste shop, “Natural Weigh”, opened its doors at the Corn Exchange on the high street of Crickhowell in my constituency earlier this month. May we have a debate on what more the Government can do to ensure more shops follow its example, and therefore help reduce the unnecessary amount of plastic packaging that is doing so much harm to our environment?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate my hon. Constituents on this great endeavour and wish them every success with it. The passion with which hon. Members across the House put forward ideas for reducing plastic waste shows that we as consumers as well as our constituents will be very keen to support such measures by retailers. He will be aware that the small retailers associations are now committed themselves to joining in the 5p charge for plastic bags, which will help, and I encourage all hon. Members to support their retailers who are doing so much to ensure we vote with our feet on this subject.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time about the practices of housing developers such as Persimmon? On Monday, I did a
walkabout with Councillor Elaine Ballantyne on the Lowlands estate in the Baillieston area. Residents of that new-build estate have been promised a railway bridge, bus routes, play parks, a motorway spur; all these things were promised in the sales centre, but have not been delivered. May we therefore have a debate to hold these developers to account?

Andrea Leadom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise those issues. We all have developments in our constituencies where there have been lots of promises, but then constituents are disappointed by the lack of action on them, and I am sure we all, as I do, write furious letters to developers asking them, “Where is this? Where is that? You promised the other.” So there is clearly an issue there. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate to deal with the specific issues in his constituency and commend him for raising this matter.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): On Tuesday, amusement arcade operators in Cleethorpes expressed their anger at the possible withdrawal of 1p and 2p coins, and they were later joined by the local hospice, St Andrew’s, and other local charities that also expressed their concern. They are now confused about what the Government’s policy is. May we have a statement to clarify whether the consultation is ongoing, and whether or not it will indeed include the possible withdrawal of 1p and 2p coins?

Andrea Leadom: The Prime Minister’s spokesman has said that there are no proposals to scrap 1p or 2p coins. The call for evidence was simply intended to help the Government better understand the role of cash and digital payments. One element of that was whether the denominational mix of coins meets the public need. From the early reaction, it looks as if it does. It is safe to say that the penny has dropped. We have considered change, but we know that we like change, so we think we will probably keep change and have no change.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Since raising the York housing crisis in the Chamber, my inbox has been flooded with horrific stories of damp and mouldy housing in York, where landlords, both council and private, have completely failed my constituents. May we have a debate about the condition of housing, with particular regard to damp and mouldy homes, so that we can stamp out damp once and for all?

Andrea Leadom: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important issue, and there is no doubt that the Government are determined to help to ensure that all homes meet the right standards and that we stamp out issues such as damp and the other problems that so many tenants have. The Government support the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation and Liability for Housing Standards) Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), and we are committed to protecting tenants’ rights and to giving tenants more security through our tenant fees Bill, which will ban unfair letting fees and other ways in which tenants are mistreated. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) makes an important point, and I am sure that there will be many opportunities to raise it in the coming months.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): When the results of the English votes for English laws Divisions were announced on Tuesday, the number of Members from English constituencies had been counted not by Tellers, but by the electronic devices in the Lobbies. Is it not time to drag this place into the late 20th century by introducing electronic voting for all Divisions?

Andrea Leadom: Many of us find the Lobby a useful place to discuss matters pertaining to our constituents and to policy, and Divisions present a great opportunity to meet Ministers. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to hang around a bit to raise some of the issues that he often raises with me on a Thursday with the relevant Minister, which could not happen if he rushes through or votes electronically.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman will only be raising such matters with Ministers in the Lobby if he votes with them—[Laughter.] I cannot imagine that happening very often. Nevertheless, the Leader of the House has hope and has made her position and that of a great many Members very clear.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I am sure that I am not alone in being less than impressed with the answers given by the Foreign Secretary when he was quizzed on the “Today” programme this morning about what action the Government are taking to freeze the assets of people associated with the Putin regime as part of our response to what happened in Salisbury. I know that the Government cannot give us a running commentary on exactly what they are doing at the moment, but this House will want an account of what urgent action they took to freeze assets to prevent them from being moved. Will the Leader of the House convey that to the Government and make arrangements for such a statement in the near future?

Andrea Leadom: This is a serious matter. This morning, the Foreign Secretary was making it clear that, unlike others, this country abides by the rule of law. It is not for Ministers simply to decide to freeze assets; we go by the law of the land. We are putting in place a review, within the law, of all those whom we suspect may have assets that we may wish to consider freezing, and Ministers will of course report exactly what is happening to the House as soon as they are able to do so.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): As universal credit is rolled out across more of the country, will the Leader of the House ensure that we have more regular opportunities to question Ministers and to tell them what is happening on the ground? In Newport, where the roll-out started in November, we have seen a threefold increase in food parcels, mostly attributed to universal credit, and Ministers need to hear that.

Andrea Leadom: I want to be clear that universal credit is designed to make work pay and to help people get into work, and there is evidence that that is working. It is encouraging more people to seek work and to get work, and the idea is to reduce the complexity of the previous benefit system. The hon. Lady speaks as though it is making people worse off, but it is not; it is making people better off. The Government have listened carefully to the many representations from right across the House.
and have improved the roll-out of universal credit, taking things slowly to ensure that we get it right and that universal credit continues to result in more people finding work and having the security of a pay packet.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Can we have a debate in Government time on the responsibilities of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office? Three weeks ago today, I raised the urgent case of Liam Colgan, the Inverness man who went missing in Hamburg. I took the advice of the Leader of the House and wrote to Ministers, but three weeks later I have not had a response, despite having chased and chased, because of clearance and awaiting signature. The family is in trauma. Should Ministers not come to the House and explain this lack of urgency?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear that. I recall the hon. Gentleman raising that case with me, and I am happy to chase the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on his behalf.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Two years ago, my constituent Malorie Bantock was attacked by her ex-partner and an accomplice. She was eight months pregnant, and they deliberately targeted her stomach, stamping on her until they caused the loss of the child. Malorie launched a campaign this Mothers’ Day, with the support of Women’s Aid and the Mother of the House, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), to get the Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929 updated. Will the Government provide time to debate this issue, to ensure that men who commit violence that causes the loss of a child are adequately prosecuted and given more appropriate, lengthier sentences?

Andrea Leadsom: All hon. Members will be appalled to hear of that situation; it is just terrible, and I am very sorry to hear about it. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government have produced a draft Domestic Violence and Abuse Bill, and it would be very appropriate for him to submit this case to the consultation on the draft Bill, so that it can be considered along with all the other measures. Those measures show the Government’s determination to stamp out domestic violence, which is so often directed towards women and, I am afraid, towards pregnant women.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Equality and Human Rights Commission yesterday released a damning report on the cumulative impact of tax and welfare reforms. The report highlighted the fact that three quarters of households with three children, and three quarters of Pakistani households, are losing out as a result of welfare reforms. That is a huge concern for my constituents in Glasgow Central. May we have a debate in Government time about the need for equality impact assessments to make sure that Government policy is not racist?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is a huge champion of Hull city of culture, which is just coming to an end. The statistics that she gives us are extremely reassuring to Members across the House, because they demonstrate what a huge success the programme has been. She is exactly right about the need to debate the lessons for Coventry, so that it, too, can take advantage of an excellent experience such as she has had. May I suggest that she raise the matter at Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions next Thursday?

Alex Norris (Northampton North) (Lab/Co-op): Last Friday, we held our constituency jobs fair and I am pleased to say that 956 local people came to it. Of course, we would hope that we would not need a jobs fair at all, but the number of people there is a sign of the impact of that event, and many people will get into work and training as a result. Will the Leader of the House give me guidance on finding an opportunity during House business for me to shower praise on the Northampton Jobs Fair and its enormous turnout he had at his local jobs fair. All hon. Members who have held jobs fairs have found that same enthusiasm, both from employers and from people looking for a job, which has been heart-warming. Of course, we have seen an extraordinary increase in employment, so that now we are near record highs for employment across the UK. We have had well over 30% increases in employment right across the UK, rising to increases of 42% in the east midlands and 38% in the west midlands, and in the south-east unemployment is down by 47%. We have some amazing jobs statistics to look at as a result of the measures we

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady should welcome the work of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in the race disparity audit, which is the first attempt by any Government to try to measure whether there is disparity in the treatment of people according to their race, ethnicity or religion. That is absolutely vital. Almost 600,000 fewer children now live in workless households; there are now 200,000 fewer children in absolute poverty; and income inequality is lower than it was in any year of the last Labour Government. We are making progress, and we are committed to doing more. This Government are showing a determination to stamp out the kind of disparity that the hon. Lady talks about.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am sure the Leader of the House will be interested to know that the Culture, Place and Policy Institute at Hull University is today releasing its preliminary evaluation of Hull city of culture, which brought to the city £300 million of tourism value and 800 new jobs. More than nine out of 10 residents engaged in at least one cultural activity, and 56,000 children and young people engaged with the arts. That is not to mention the acres of positive publicity for the city. May we have a debate in Parliament about the value of public investment in culture, the success of Hull city of culture and the lessons that Coventry can learn when it takes up the city of culture baton in 2021?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is a huge champion of Hull city of culture, which is just coming to an end. The statistics that she gives us are extremely reassuring to Members across the House, because they demonstrate what a huge success the programme has been. She is exactly right about the need to debate the lessons for Coventry, so that it, too, can take advantage of an excellent experience such as she has had. May I suggest that she raise the matter at Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions next Thursday?
have put in place to see a thriving economy, with lower taxes for people and more people with the security of a wage packet to take home.

Mr Speaker: Last but not least, and never forgotten, Mr Peter Grant.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am eternally grateful to you, Mr Speaker. May we have a statement from the Work and Pensions Secretary on the operation of the cold weather payments system? Constituents in most of my constituency were astonished to discover that it was not cold enough to trigger the payments during a week in which they were under 2 feet to 3 feet of snow, travel of any kind was impossible and they were subject to Scotland’s first ever red alert due to the danger from snow and ice. The problem is that the DWP does not measure the temperature in Glenrothes; it measures it 20 miles away in a coastal location almost 600 feet in altitude lower than parts of Collydean in my constituency. May we have a review, so that at least the residents of Glenrothes and Levenmouth will know that, while they have to deal with the same weather as everyone else, they will be entitled to the same financial support as everyone else?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the severe weather payments that are made available and of payments made to people who struggle to meet their own energy bills. Department for Work and Pensions questions are on Monday 26 March, a week on Monday, and his question would be an ideal one to raise then.

11.37 am

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on issues arising from the Metropolitan police investigation into the Grenfell tragedy.

The investigation has involved a thorough examination of every aspect of the tower, including front doors to flats within the property. Those doors include a glazed fire door manufactured around five years ago. Initial inspections indicate that the door is believed to have been designed to resist fire for up to 30 minutes, but when tested by the Metropolitan police, it failed after approximately 15 minutes. The Metropolitan police considered that this test result might have wider implications for public safety and alerted my Department.

The Government immediately sought advice from the independent expert panel on the test findings to see whether any action was required as a result. The expert panel is made up of a range of building and fire safety experts, and is chaired by Sir Ken Knight, the former London fire commissioner and former Government chief fire and rescue adviser.

The panel consulted representatives from the Metropolitan police, the Government’s chief scientific advisers and the National Fire Chiefs Council. Following that, the expert panel has advised that the risks to public safety remain low. There is no change to the fire safety advice that the public should follow. I, nevertheless, fully appreciate that this news will be troubling for many people, not least all those affected by the Grenfell tragedy. That is why, based on expert advice, we have begun the process of conducting further tests, and we will continue to consult the expert panel to identify the implications of those further tests. I have made it clear that the necessary tests and assessments must be carried out thoroughly, but at pace.

There is no evidence that this is a systemic issue. Data from between 2009 and 2017 shows that fire does not generally spread beyond the room of origin. I am also clear that my Department and the Metropolitan police will ensure that the bereaved and the survivors are kept informed of progress. I commit to updating the House when further information is available, and no later than the end of April.

I stress that, in carrying out the tests, conclusions should not be drawn about the nature or cause of the Grenfell tragedy. That is a matter for a separate police investigation that must be allowed to run its course. Members will be aware that Dame Judith Hackitt is undertaking an independent review of building regulations and fire safety to ensure that the regulatory system is sufficiently robust. Dame Judith has been made aware of these latest findings. Having accepted the initial recommendations that were set out in her interim report in December, we look forward to her final report, which is expected in the spring.

Nine months ago, we faced a loss of life and suffering on an unimaginable scale at Grenfell. Since then, the Government and others have made significant efforts to support survivors, find them new homes and help to keep people safe. However, I know that the matters I have raised today will prompt questions. I reiterate that
on the basis of the expert advice that my Department has received, there is no evidence that risks to the public have changed.

I reassure hon. Members that all possible steps are being taken to properly investigate the issues and to take action where needed. Public safety is paramount and our position is clear: the events of 14 June 2017 must never be allowed to happen again. I commend the statement to the House.

11.41 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for early sight of his statement.

Nine months on, we all still live with the human tragedy of Grenfell and the realisation that we saw the systemic failure of our system of building checks and controls. We must keep that in mind because, as the Secretary of State said—I will always endorse these words—public safety has to be paramount. That also means, however, that there has to be transparency, accountability and a driving sense of urgency.

I welcome the transparency of the Secretary of State’s making this statement at the earliest possible stage. It is right and proper that this information is in the public domain, so I thank him. I think he would agree that if the Opposition demand accountability and that the Government demonstrate a sense of urgency, that can never be open to the charge of political point-scoring.

I add my thanks for the work of the Metropolitan police. The Secretary of State told us that the “Metropolitan police considered that this test result might have wider implications for public safety” and consequently alerted the Department. I was a little surprised when he said that there is “no evidence that this is a systemic issue.” I was astounded when he went on to say: “Data from between 2009 and 2017 shows that fire does not generally spread beyond the room of origin.” That may be true, but we know that that was exactly what did happen in Grenfell Tower—the fire spread and spread and spread. We cannot have any sense of complacency.

The Secretary of State says that this issue is not “systemic”, but what assessment has been made of how many buildings might be affected? How many individual flats—how many people—have fire doors that simply do not do the job? If he does not already know those numbers—I suspect it is too early to know—what steps is he taking to ascertain them? This is the point at which the words “this is not systemic” begin to sound a little incredible. There may be a systemic problem, and we have to begin to recognise that if this is a wide-scale issue, we have that systemic problem.

We need a real sense of urgency on this, as indeed we do regarding other aspects of building control. Tower block residents up and down the country are entitled to know—not simply post Grenfell—the scale of the issues. I must say to the Secretary of State that that sense of urgency has not always been apparent in all the Government’s actions. Earlier this week, he was a little embarrassed when he was not able to answer a question that was put to him at Question Time about how many private tower blocks up and down the country have the same aluminium composite material cladding that was used on Grenfell. We now need some urgency in providing those answers and bringing the information before the House. I hope that he can tell us when he will have that information and when we can begin to give people a sense of reassurance.

In a recent written answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), the shadow Housing Minister, the Department confirmed that no funding had yet been provided to any of the 41 local authorities that had contacted it. We were told at Question Time that no funding requests had been refused, but that is not quite the full truth if the reality is that no funding request had actually been acceded to. Again, perhaps the Secretary of State can update us and tell us when the local authorities, which really do want to get on with this work, will see the assistance from central Government to which he committed nearly nine months ago.

The upshot of all of this is that, nine months on, only seven of more than 300 tower blocks that had been identified as having dangerous cladding have had that cladding removed and replaced with something more acceptable. I must say to the Secretary of State that, nine months on, that is simply not good enough.

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and I am very happy to answer all the points that he has made.

The hon. Gentleman rightly said—of course we all agree with this—that public safety is the No. 1 issue and is absolutely paramount in every way. He will know that ever since the tragedy, as well as through the police investigation and the work that is being done through the public inquiry, there have been lessons for public safety. He will remember that, right from the start, the expert panel was convened to provide the immediate emergency advice that was necessary, and that advice went out widely to the owners of both social and private sector buildings. The testing regime—the initial sample testing and then the large-scale testing—was set up, as was the independent review, which is now being carried out by Dame Judith Hackitt. I was quite deliberate in wanting to see an interim report so that we could act on some of the early lessons. I remind the hon. Gentleman that Dame Judith Hackitt’s interim report included a number of recommendations, which we have accepted, and we have now started to implement every single one of them. She is now working on her final report, which is due, as planned, in the spring. Again, that reflects our sense of urgency.

Once the expert panel and the police are comfortable that information can be publicly shared, it is right that we are transparent as quickly as possible. That is necessary to create public trust and to ensure that no one comes under any undue stress. Throughout the whole process, we have correctly been led by the experts—the expert panel and all the industry advisers who have been put in place—as well as by the work that has been done by the police.

Let me give the hon. Gentleman a bit more information about that. As well as the independent expert panel, the Government have consulted the National Fire Chiefs Council, the Government’s chief scientific advisers, the police, of course, and the London Fire Brigade. As a result, the expert panel has concluded that, so far, the risk to public safety remains low, that there is no change to fire safety advice, and that a programme of additional testing has to be commissioned to determine the root
cause of the failed test. Such additional testing is required; it is going on now. As I said, it must be thorough and done at pace, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman agrees that we should not rush it, meaning that we get either wrong or inappropriate results. It should be done properly. It should be led by the experts and only on their advice. That is exactly why I said in my statement that there is no evidence of a systemic problem—it is the advice of the experts so far. We are correctly taking their advice while we continue with further tests at pace.

The hon. Gentleman seemed to suggest that work was not being done at pace or urgently. I refute that. We have rightly worked as urgently as possible every step of the way, whether that is on today’s information or other information that has come to light since the fire. That includes work on the remediation of existing buildings with ACM cladding. So far, 301 buildings have been identified: 158 social buildings; 13 in the public sector; and 130 in the private sector. Almost 60% have begun the remediation work and, as the hon. Gentleman said, seven have completed that work. Public safety is paramount, so in every single case, interim steps were taken and measures were put in place immediately, with expert advice, often from the local fire brigade. Those measures remain in place. People can be comfortable that every measure is being taken to ensure that they remain safe.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I think that the House will support what my right hon. Friend said about waiting to get the determination of those investigating regarding the causes.

We know about the liabilities and the risks. The hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) mentioned private leaseholders in private blocks. This week saw the first proper tribunal decision, regarding Citiscape in Croydon, which is owned by the Tchenguiz interests. Ordinary taxpaying residents there are being asked to pay tens of thousands of pounds, and the same thing is happening at New Capital Quay in Greenwich, Heysmoor Heights in Liverpool, and in another 129 blocks that I could name.

May I put it to my right hon. Friend that he ought to get together the Tchenguiz interests, William Waldorf Astor’s Long Harbour and Abacus interests, the builders, the leaseholders and their representatives in order to have a roundtable in the open? Instead of waiting two years until an inquiry is done, it is time to get these people together and talk about a simple deal whereby, for example, the builders put up a third, the freeholders put up a third and the Government/tenants put up a third to get the cladding removed and replaced.

Sajid Javid: I am very much aware of the legal judgment to which my hon. Friend refers, and we are carefully considering its implications. I have been clear all along—I have said this a number of times in the House and I will say it again—that whatever the legal situation might be, the private owners of buildings should take their lead from the public sector and take responsibility for the additional costs. They might want to look at insurance claims, warranties and legal action that they may be able to take. I also want to ensure that leaseholders get the advice that they need, which is why we have increased funding to the Leasehold Advisory Service.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Nine months after Grenfell and with new concerns emerging, it is no surprise that residents in high-rise buildings remain extremely concerned. A matter of possible reassurance for them was the retrofitting of sprinklers. My local authority of Westminster has advised that it is concerned about proceeding with retrofitting because it has no right of access to the one in three properties in private ownership in social housing blocks. This is a matter not of regulation, but of ensuring access. Will the Secretary of State advise how he can take this forward as a matter of urgency so that councils that wish to proceed with retrofitting are clearly able to do so?

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Lady that, in the light of all the information that has come to light since the terrible tragedy, local authorities should quite rightly take whatever action is needed to keep residents safe in high-rise buildings. That is exactly what is expected of them and they have our full support. We have said that it is for the local authorities to make their own decisions on sprinklers, based on expert advice. If they decide to proceed, they will get the financial flexibility to support them. If other issues are getting in the way of doing that job, we will be happy to look at them. A number of local authorities have approached us, and we are working with them all and will help them all in every way.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The fact that a number of high-rise office blocks in Barnet are being converted to residential use under permitted development rights, without the need for planning permission, leads some to fear that design standards will be compromised because of the absence of a planning process. Will the Government take action to ensure that fire safety standards are not compromised in these kinds of conversions?

Sajid Javid: I can assure my right hon. Friend that even when building work is carried out under permitted development rights, it still needs to be subject to building regulations, including all those around safety. There is no way that any builder can avoid that. I hope that that gives some reassurance to her residents. The building regulations are still very much in place, even when work is done under permitted development rights.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The Grenfell Tower fire laid bare profound injustices at the heart of the UK housing system, and every revelation from the investigation makes that picture starker and clearer. So far, the Government have not made available a single penny of new Government money for essential works to respond to and mitigate the risks revealed as a consequence of Grenfell. Unless the Government do so, they are simply meting out further injustice to leaseholders, who will face very large bills, and tenants, who will see much-needed major works pushed back. Will the Secretary of State take the opportunity of this latest revelation to commit new Government resources to address the impact of Grenfell Tower on fire safety across the country, and to right the wrongs at the heart of the UK housing system?

Sajid Javid: I would say two things. With regard to local authorities, we have made it very clear that we will provide them with the financial flexibility, if they need
it, to do any necessary fire safety work. That has been
clear from the start. On wider issues of social housing and some of the wider lessons to learn from this terrible
tragedy, that is exactly why we will have a Green Paper. We are going through the process that has been put in
place, and we will publish the Green Paper in due
course after proper consultation.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my
right hon. Friend not only for today’s statement, but for keeping the House updated on progress following this
terrible tragedy.

Dame Judith Hackitt is looking at the review of building regulations. We, as the Housing, Communities and
Local Government Committee, have asked that she looks particularly at part P of those regulations in
detail, because at the moment there seems to be a lack of clarity about the use of combustible materials within
high-rise buildings. Will my right hon. Friend commit to thoroughly reviewing building regulations, particularly
taking into account the evidence that has emerged today? The reality is that while fires may normally be retained within a room, these were not normal circumstances, because there was an explosion caused by an electrical fire, and that could be replicated once again.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this. As he will know, Dame Judith Hackitt’s work is independent, but she takes this issue very seriously. He may know that in her interim report she recommended, as one of the immediate measures, a review of Approved Document B and work to clarify it. That work has already started within my Department and we hope to consult on this in the summer.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): This is obviously another worrying development that reinforces Dame Judith Hackitt’s interim findings of the cultural change needed across the board, which the Secretary of State referred to. We look forward to her conclusions, including, I hope, on the updating of fire guidance in Approved Document B.

What assistance can the Secretary of State offer to leaseholders who face bills of thousands of pounds for fire marshals and replacement cladding, and now perhaps for new fire doors, given that they have no responsibility for the predicament in which they find themselves? I draw attention to the question asked by the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley). The Secretary of State’s exhortations to property management companies and freeholders are falling on deaf ears, and leaseholders are having to pick up the tab.

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming Dame Judith Hackitt’s work.

I and the Government very much understand the situation that leaseholders are in. It is obviously a very difficult and distressing situation for many people—we understand that. I do not accept that what I and others have said about owners’ moral duty is falling on deaf ears. There have actually been a number of instances in which we have got involved and some of the private owners have listened. They do not wish to be public about that—that is their choice—but at least they have listened and helped the leaseholders. I want more to do the same. I am keeping the issue under review and looking to see what more we can do.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): We all in the House have been deeply moved by the dignity of the survivors of the Grenfell Tower disaster, the bereaved and the volunteers. Many of us have also had casework and individuals come to us with concerns about where they live. Will my right hon. Friend commit to continuing to do absolutely everything in his power to ensure they get the help, support and justice they deserve?

Sajid Javid: I am very happy, once again, to make that commitment. The work continues each day in my Department and across Government through the ministerial group set up to help the survivors of the Grenfell disaster. I am very happy to re-emphasise that commitment to my hon. Friend.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have found the Secretary of State to be a very good communicator and very good at keeping the House informed, so any criticisms I now make should be heard with that in mind. I just do not understand the guidance he has given in response to a couple of questions I have asked. The fact is that many thousands of people in our country have a black cloud hanging over them. Be they leaseholders or freeholders, they cannot get it out of their minds, because they do not know how much they will be responsible for. I have begged him to get everyone together—the Government should put something in, too, because they changed the standard. Please can we get this sorted?

Sajid Javid: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, the issue of leaseholders and what can and cannot be done is fast changing. As he may know, a legal case was waiting to be heard and was only concluded a couple of days ago, and as I said earlier, we are studying the outcome. On his point about getting people together, we are in the process of setting up a roundtable with several interested parties, including representatives of leaseholders, which I think will help.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for swiftly updating the House. Many of our citizens are deeply concerned about fire risk and—I am afraid—sceptical of statements made by Governments of any colour. Will he remind the House of the quality and strength of the panel advising him on these important issues?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I am very happy to do that. The expert panel is chaired by Sir Ken Knight, the former London fire commissioner and the Government’s former chief fire and rescue adviser. Also on the panel are Dr Peter Bonfield, chief executive of the Building Research Establishment, Mr Roy Wilsher, chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council, and Miss Ann Bentley, global director of a leading construction company and a member of the Construction Leadership Council.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The expert panel’s recommendation that no change in safety advice is necessary will come as a surprise to many people. Will the Government insist that Dame Judith Hackitt’s review
of fire regulation assessments makes sure that every high-rise building assessment is published and made available in an accessible form to the public so that they can get the reassurance that I fear they will not have got from this report?

Sajid Javid: I hope that the public will be very reassured by the advice of the expert panel, not just because of the years of expertise represented on it, but—it is worth emphasising this—because it is working closely and consulting with the National Fire Chiefs Council, the Metropolitan police and the Government’s chief scientific officers. I hope that that gives more confidence to the public and the hon. Lady.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I am sure the whole House will agree that it is vital that the victims of the Grenfell tragedy get justice. Does he agree that the only way to do this is to let the police investigation and the independent inquiry get on with their jobs?

Sajid Javid: We all in the House want to see justice for the victims of the Grenfell tragedy, which is why the live police investigation to which I referred earlier as well as the work of the public inquiry are so important. Both pieces of work have the Government’s full support.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I do not find the Secretary of State’s statement at all reassuring. Nine months on, he has come to the House to say that we have just discovered that the fire doors were defective and only lasted 15 minutes in the case of a fire, not 30 minutes. My constituents are told to stay put on the basis that those doors give the fire service time to come and rescue people in tower blocks. He says that this is not a systemic problem, but just what does that mean? Were these defective doors fitted in the knowledge that they only lasted 15 minutes? Is the manufacturer to blame? How widespread is this? Are the doors in the blocks in my constituency defective? I really find this statement defective. Can we have another statement from the Secretary of State to update us with the real facts of the situation?

Sajid Javid: There is a live police investigation going on. The hon. Gentleman should appreciate that it is an independent criminal investigation by the police, and it would not be appropriate for me to talk about certain things publicly, unless he is suggesting that we should jeopardise a live police investigation.

The hon. Gentleman rightly asks about the investigation—not the police investigation, but the work being led by the expert panel—and I am happy to give him more information. There is a documentary investigation into the fire doors, led by the police, to see whether it is a whole set of fire doors or a certain batch and where they might be in the country. There is a fire testing investigation taking place, led by my Department, to test a whole number of other doors to see how widespread this problem may be. There is also a visual inspection and declassification investigation going on into the materials. I hope the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that there is a lot of work to do, and it is right that we do this thoroughly and take the time to get it right.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for providing the assurances that he has, which will be gratefully received by my constituents. He will know, as my neighbouring MP in Bromsgrove, that the people of Worcestershire have been deeply touched by this tragedy. It has affected people up and down the country. Can he give assurance to Redditch Borough Council by telling it whether there are any actions it needs to take immediately, in the light of these latest findings?

Sajid Javid: Soon after this terrible tragedy, my Department got in touch with every council in the country, including Redditch Borough Council, to inform them of what we knew at the time and any immediate measures that they must take. Since then, councils have been kept updated as we learn more information, including the information that we have talked about today.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Leaseholders at Heysmoor Heights in Liverpool are already facing bills of £18,000 each for the replacement of cladding. Who knows what this new announcement might mean for them and other people around the country? The original development company was dissolved four years ago, and the current owner is Guernsey-based Abacus Land 4 Ltd. It is still not known whether an insurance policy apparently taken out by the original developers will raise any funds at all to meet those costs. Leaseholders keep being told that they will be given an answer, but they have not had one yet. The Secretary of State keeps expressing some kind of sympathy for leaseholders caught in this situation, but what else can he do to help leaseholders in general and my constituents at Heysmoor Heights in Liverpool?

Sajid Javid: What the hon. Lady highlights is the complexity of some of these situations, which I am sure she appreciates. Despite that, we must, as she suggests, do whatever we can to help the individuals in these very difficult circumstances. That is why we are looking closely at the recent legal judgment; I believe it is the first time that a tribunal has looked at that kind of case. That is why we have provided more funding for the Leasehold Advisory Service, so that leaseholders can get more instant support. We are looking at what more can be done and are keeping the situation under review.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I have had the privilege of completing the two-year fire service parliamentary scheme, which Sir Ken Knight helped to set up. Being placed in a live carbonaceous fire with breathing apparatus, I had a small introduction to the horrors of fire and the bravery displayed by our firefighters every day of the week. Fire doors are absolutely crucial. What puzzles me about this inquiry and the statement is: who certifies that these doors are meant to last 30 minutes, if it has been demonstrated that they last half that time? Fifteen minutes may not seem very long to us in this Chamber, but for the people who are trapped behind the doors and can see fire through the glass, it is crucial. Who certifies the 30 minutes?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend speaks with experience and is absolutely right to ask that question. The door in question should have had resistance for 30 minutes. It must be tested against and meet the British standard,
to ensure that all of our tower blocks are safe and that going to get around to sorting out the building regulations it has been deemed not to be fire safe. When are we although the cladding meets the building regulations, it is subject to a live police investigation. The police have said that they are getting full co-operation from the manufacturer. It would be wrong of me to get into that, but I reassure my hon. Friend that the police are doing their work with that particular door and doors of that type, and we are doing the much wider necessary testing.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Last night one of my parliamentary staff went on the Grenfell march, and afterwards he talked to somebody who has been living in a hotel room for the past nine months. Despite the Government’s promise to rehouse these people, the figures show that, nine months after the fire, only 60 of 208 households have permanent homes. I have heard the word “urgency” being used a lot this morning. When will the Government properly rehouse these people? Will the Secretary of State give a timescale? We hear reassuring noises, but these people are telling us that they are not seeing action on the ground. Will they be rehoused for the summer, for autumn or for Christmas?

Sajid Javid: I am very happy to update the hon. Lady. There were 151 homes lost to the fire, but new homes had to be found for 209 households. I think she knows why that number is higher. So far, 184 have moved out of emergency accommodation into either temporary or permanent accommodation. That leaves 25 households who have still not accepted temporary or permanent accommodation. I hope she will appreciate that, while it is absolutely right that we work at pace and help those families to move as quickly as possible into permanent or temporary accommodation, as they choose—by the way, more than 300 homes are now available on the letting system, which is more than enough—no family can be pushed or told that they must make a decision and that they have no choice. It must be done at their pace. I cannot go into the details, but there are complicating factors with a number of the 25 households who are yet to accept temporary accommodation. There are a number of issues and it would be inappropriate, from what I know, to force those families to make a decision if they are not ready.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I continue to deal with concerns regarding the construction of a tower block in my constituency. The concern is that, although the cladding meets the building regulations, it is not fire safe—in other words, when it has been tested, it has been deemed not to be fire safe. When are we going to get around to sorting out the building regulations to ensure that all of our tower blocks are safe and that everybody can feel safe in their homes?

Sajid Javid: I am not aware of the particular tower block mentioned by the hon. Lady, but if she wants to give me more information, I will happily take a closer look. If I understood her correctly, she said that the cladding has passed building regulation tests but the tower block is not deemed safe, but I am not aware of such a case. In every case to which I have referred, it is our view that none of the cladding on a number of buildings meets building regulations, which is exactly why it needs to be removed.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The Secretary of State is well aware of the messy and as yet unresolved situation of New Capital Quay in Greenwich and the plight of leaseholders. Last week the community found out about another development in Greenwich with dangerous cladding on some of the towers. I will not go into the details, but how on earth, nine months on, are we still finding out about additional private freehold developments with lethal material around some of their blocks?

Sajid Javid: Last August I wrote to every single local authority, asking them to carry out the work of finding all the private sector buildings in their area, and providing support for them. In fact, we have just given additional funding to help with that. All of them have acted with urgency and are working at pace. Some are still discovering buildings, because the work partly requires the co-operation of the private sector. We have spoken to many private sector institutions. It would be wrong to blame the local authorities; it is right that we work with them and give them all the support necessary to find these buildings.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Immediately after Grenfell, Southwark Council’s leader, chief exec and the three borough MPs wrote to the Secretary of State asking for help to retrofit sprinklers in more than 170 tower blocks in the borough. That was a clear request for financial support. It is simply disingenuous to claim that no request has been turned down. The Department dismissively said that it would assess the council’s means to do the work itself. Nine months on, how is that assessment coming along? Has it been designed, will it be published, and when will Southwark Council be given the resources to complete the works?

Sajid Javid: We have made it very clear that all local authorities, including Southwark Council, should determine for themselves the essential work required for fire safety—public safety is the No. 1 issue—and if they need financial flexibility to help them pay for it, that will not be turned down. We are in discussions with more than 40 local authorities, many in detail. We are working with them and I am not aware of us having turned down any discussions with a single local authority. We are happy to work with them all and make sure that they get the financial flexibility they need.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): As west London near neighbours, residents in the London borough of Ealing can see Grenfell—the charred coffin in the sky—from bits of my constituency. I passed by it yesterday. My constituent John Metcalfe attended the silent march last night and says that there were massive numbers and the sense of injustice was overwhelming. The Minister has repeatedly said that public safety is paramount. What is he doing to instil public confidence—I will not say “regain”, because I do not think it was ever there—in the inquiry and the aftermath?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of building more public confidence in the local community—not just the former residents of Grenfell Tower, but the immediate community. Much work has been done by the council, as well as by residents themselves, with Government support. For example, we have worked
with and given support to Grenfell United, the group set up by victims of the tragedy. We will continue to do that, but I hope the hon. Lady will appreciate that it will take a long time—perhaps years—to build the right level of confidence. Part of that process is making sure that the community is listened to every step of the way and that it is treated respectfully. For example, I determined that it was very important that the bereaved were told last night the news that I have shared with the House today, so that they heard it in advance and did not hear about it first in Parliament. That is the way in which we continue to work with the community and help in every way we can.

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): The Secretary of State’s comments on rehousing survivors do not equate with my experience: a great deal more than 25 households are still waiting for any kind of suitable offer. On the fire doors, I received a message just this morning from an elderly architect friend who worked as part of the team on the Grenfell Tower and estate. In his experience, the architects at the time specified fire doors that lasted one hour. Architects knew what they were doing in those days and they signed it off at the end. They were responsible from beginning to end. In those days, in the 1970s, fire doors were supposed to last for one hour. They are now down to 30 minutes. Can we please reconsider whether half an hour is enough in buildings of that size?

Sajid Javid: First, let me reiterate the latest figures I have. Of the 209 households originally from Grenfell Tower that need to be rehoused, 184 have accepted offers of temporary or permanent accommodation, which leaves 25 that have not accepted offers of either. There are now over 300 units available of different sizes and types, and in different locations, and family liaison officers and key workers are working with each family. As I said earlier, we will not rush this: it will be done at the pace that the survivors want. That is the correct process.

The hon. Lady asked me about the fire doors and whether one hour, versus half an hour, is correct. This is exactly one of the reasons why I have set up the independent building regulations and fire safety inquiry—the work being done by Dame Judith Hackitt—and I know that she will be looking at this issue.

Burma

12.20 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to update the House on the desperate plight of Burma’s Rohingya in the week that the UN fact-finding mission on Burma has reported to the Human Rights Council with its interim findings.

The international community has repeatedly called on the Burmese authorities to allow the fact-finding mission to enter Burma. Regrettably, Burma continues to refuse access. Despite this, through interviewing Rohingya refugees in both Bangladesh and Malaysia, the interim report has revealed credible evidence of the widespread and systematic abuse, rape and murder of Rohingya people, and the destruction of their homes and villages, primarily by the Burmese military. This is not only a human tragedy; it is a humanitarian catastrophe. Since August 2017, nearly 650,000 Rohingya refugees have sought shelter in Bangladesh.

There have been some suggestions, including by the Foreign Affairs Committee, that the UK failed to see this crisis coming. With respect, I disagree with such a conclusion. Let us be clear about what has led to this current situation. The Rohingya have suffered persecution in Rakhine for decades. Such rights as they had have been progressively diminished under successive military Governments. They have been victims of systematic violence before, most recently in 2012 and in late 2016. On these more recent occasions, the Rohingya fled their homes—some to internally displaced person camps elsewhere in Rakhine, and some to other nations over land or sea. The outbreak of vicious hostility during the past six months is therefore only the latest episode in a long-lasting cycle of violence. We have been urging the Burmese civilian Government to take action to stop the situation deteriorating since they came to power two years ago. What was unprecedented and unforeseen about this most recent violence was its scale and intensity.

A recent report by the International Crisis Group has rightly noted that there is and can be no military solution alone to this crisis. The 25 August attack by Arakan Rohingya Salvation army militants on Burmese security forces, which triggered the latest phase, was clearly an unacceptable and deliberate provocation, but the Burmese military’s relentless response since then has been utterly appalling and entirely inexcusable. Its operations only last week on Burma’s border with Bangladesh were supposedly directed against another wave of ARSA militants. Whether or not that explanation is to be believed, the actual impact of the Burmese military’s actions was to terrorise thousands of Rohingya living in the area and to encourage ever more civilians to cross over into Bangladesh.

I once again commend the generosity of the Government and people of Bangladesh for opening their doors to these desperate refugees. The UK remains one of the largest bilateral aid donors to the crisis. We have committed some £59 million in the past six months to help ensure the refugees’ immediate wellbeing. This includes £5 million of matched funding for the very generous public donations by British citizens to the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal.

My right hon. Friend the International Development Secretary visited Bangladesh last November and announced the latest UK package of support, including for survivors.
of sexual and other violence. We anticipate that the multi-agency plan for the next phase of humanitarian support, from March to the end of the year, will be published imminently. As the International Development Secretary confirmed during her Bangladesh visit, the UK is and will remain committed to the Rohingya now and, I suspect, for many years to come. At the end of last year, the UK Government deployed British doctors, nurses and firefighters from our emergency medical teams to Bangladesh to tackle an outbreak of deadly diphtheria in the refugee camps.

In northern Rakhine—within Burma’s borders—where humanitarian access remains severely restricted, the UK is providing £2 million of support via the World Food Programme and a further £1 million via the Red Cross, one of the few international organisations that has access to that part of Burma. We stand ready to do more as soon as we are permitted full access.

We continue to work tirelessly in co-operation with international partners to find a solution to this crisis, focusing international attention and pressure on the Burmese authorities and security forces. Since the final week of August, the UK has repeatedly raised the crisis as an issue for debate at the UN Security Council, most recently on 13 February. The existence of the UN fact-finding mission is in no small part due to British diplomacy, and I have engaged and will continue to engage with its members.

In November, the UK was instrumental in securing the first UN Security Council presidential statement on Burma for a decade, which delivered a very clear message that the Burmese authorities should protect all civilians within Burma, create the conditions for refugees to return and allow full humanitarian access in Rakhine state. Late last month, I was privileged to attend the EU Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels, where a programme of sanctions against senior Burmese military figures was outlined. I am glad to say that this was approved unanimously, and we hope to bring this work to the attention of the UN Security Council soon.

I know that many hon. Members remain very deeply committed to helping to resolve the appalling situation faced by the Rohingya community, and I welcome that continued engagement. I visited both countries in September, and I returned to Burma in November. During those visits, I met displaced Rohingya, but also Hindu and Buddhist communities in Rakhine, and heard harrowing accounts of human rights violations and abuses. It was clear that the communities remain very deeply divided, and there is still a palpable sense of mutual fear and mistrust. At that time, I met State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, the Minister for Defence and the deputy Foreign Minister to reiterate the urgent need to take action to end the violence and allow a path for the safe return of the refugees.

During his visit to Burma last month, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, in a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi, pressed for the necessary steps to be taken to create the conditions conducive for the return of the refugees. He flew over Rakhine, and saw for himself the scale of the destruction—the ongoing destruction—of land and property there. He also visited Bangladesh, where he met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Foreign Minister Ali, and visited the camps in Cox’s Bazar, where he heard distressing accounts from survivors, as well as their heartfelt hopes for a better future and their desire to return safely to Burma. Our visits have reinforced our determination to help resolve this appalling crisis.

I recognise that the House remains deeply committed to ensuring that the human rights of refugees, but particularly of the Rohingya, are protected, and welcome the House’s resolution to that effect as recently as 24 January. Let me outline, if I may, some of the next steps. We believe that there are four immediate priorities. First, we must continue to address the humanitarian needs, especially the needs of victims of sexual violence, in both northern Rakhine and in Bangladesh. This includes assisting, as a matter of urgency, the humanitarian agencies working in the vicinity of Cox’s Bazar to help prepare for the approaching monsoon and cyclone season, which commences in a matter of weeks. We shall continue to work with international humanitarian agencies delivering aid in Rakhine state, and to support Bangladesh in its efforts to help those fleeing the violence.

Secondly, we must continue the patient work towards achieving a safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees. We shall press for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to oversee this process and ensure full verification of any returns on both sides of the border. As the globally mandated body, we believe the UNHCR remains the best equipped and most credible agency to oversee this very difficult process.

Thirdly, we must continue international progress towards bringing to justice the perpetrators of human rights violations, including sexual violence, in Rakhine. The international community has agreed to make the case to the Burmese authorities for a credible, transparent and independent inquiry. In my view, united international pressure will be essential in achieving that aim.

The UN fact-finding mission is a first and important step in what is likely to be a long road ahead. It produced its interim report on Monday, reflecting the violent, military-led, abhorrent actions against the Rohingya and other communities in Burma. We shall continue to support the mission’s important work, including urging Burma to allow it unrestricted access. We will also continue to provide support to build the capacity of the National Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh to investigate properly and document sexual violence among Rohingya refugees.

As Canada’s special envoy to Burma, Bob Rae—I saw him at the Foreign Office only a few weeks ago—said, “those responsible for breaches of international law and crimes against humanity must be brought to justice”.

In my view, that applies to all involved: state and non-state actors, senior military personnel, and all individuals in authority. Yanghee Lee, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Burma, recently stated that the conflict had the “hallmarks of genocide”.

I must tell the House, however, that the only path to prosecution for genocide or crimes against humanity is via the International Criminal Court. It is a legal process. Burma is not a party to the Rome statute, and must therefore either refer itself to the Court, or be referred by the UN Security Council. I fear that neither eventuality is likely in the short term, but that should not stop us supporting those who continue to collate and collect evidence for use in any future prosecution.

Finally, to achieve a long-term resolution to the crisis in Burma, even in these desperate circumstances, the UK should play a leading role in trying to support a
[Mark Field]

democratic transition and the promotion of freedom, tolerance and diversity. To do that, we will continue to engage, and support attempts peacefully to resolve many of Burma’s internal conflicts, and to bring all parts of state apparatus under democratic, civilian control. We stand ready to lead the international community in ensuring the implementation of Kofi Annan’s report from the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State. That crucial programme is designed to deliver development for the benefit of all the people of Rakhine state, including the Rohingya, and address the underlying causes of the current crisis. Above all, that includes reviewing the punitive 1982 citizenship law, and making progress on ensuring citizenship for the Rohingya, who are otherwise regarded by many as stateless. We must give them confidence that they have a future as fully-fledged citizens of Burma.

The situation in Burma serves as the clearest possible example of why our Government will continue to uphold their commitments to early warning and preventing the risk of atrocity crimes, in the context of broader conflict-preventing and peace-building work. It is vital that lessons from this human tragedy are used to prevent similar situations from developing in the future. I stand ready to work with Members from across the House, and with NGOs that have a real passion in this area, on getting a framework in place for the future.

The UK Government intend to remain in the vanguard of international action and to support a full range of humanitarian, political and diplomatic efforts to help resolve this appalling situation. We shall continue to press Burma to facilitate the safe, voluntary and dignified return of the Rohingya Muslims under UNHCR oversight, and also to address, properly and fully, the underlying causes of the violence. We shall not and must not lose sight of the fact that the Rohingya community have suffered for generations and will need our continued support to live the lives they choose. Neither will we fail to take account of the wider picture in Burma and the potential that sustained movement towards an open, democratic society offers to all its people. We shall push forward with persistence, focus and energy—it is our international and moral duty to do so. I commend the statement to the House.

12.34 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I thank the Minister for that clear and comprehensive update on the situation of the Rohingya, and for giving me advance sight of his statement. No one can doubt the effort and commitment that he and his officials in the Foreign Office and on the ground are putting into resolving this issue.

I also welcome several specific aspects of the Minister’s update. First, the interim report of the UN fact-finding mission—both in its level of detail about the atrocities suffered by the Rohingya and in the unflinching language it uses to describe those genocidal acts—is a vital first step in building a case against the individuals responsible. Secondly, I welcome the public’s generosity, and the Government’s continued commitment to providing humanitarian relief to the Rohingya refugees trapped in Cox’s Bazar and elsewhere. I applaud the tireless work of British medical professionals seeking to stop the spread of disease in the camps.

Thirdly, I welcome the Minister’s words on the role of UNHCR in ensuring a safe, dignified and voluntary return, and a sustainable future for those refugees. The international community must continue to put pressure on the Government in Myanmar to allow UNHCR to dictate when and how it will be appropriate to begin that repatriation process. Fourthly, I welcome the Minister’s continued support for the Kofi Annan report, and the vital long-term reforms it sets out to give full rights and lasting protection to the Rohingya community in Myanmar. Democratic and civil society development did not improve as we hoped two years ago, and only this week I heard also about 100,000 displaced people in Kachin state.

I welcome the progress that the Minister mentioned on agreeing EU-wide sanctions against leading Myanmar generals. Only two weeks ago, Foreign Office Ministers were avoiding a debate and voting down Labour’s Magnitsky amendments. I was therefore pleased that the Prime Minister expressed a change of heart yesterday, not least because we noticed that the United States used Magnitsky provisions to sanction one of the generals, Maung Maung Soe.

The Minister spoke about the importance of providing support for the victims of sexual violence, and documenting the abuses that they have suffered, with a view to bringing prosecutions against those responsible at some future date. He will know the concern across the House that when we last received an update on Myanmar, it was confirmed that only two of the 70 sexual violence experts employed as part of the Government’s preventing sexual violence initiative in 2012 had been deployed to work on those cases. Have more of those staff now been deployed in the refugee camps? Are those two experts still there? How many people are now working to support victims and document their evidence? What percentage of the victims of sexual violence does he estimate have now received support and had their cases documented, whether by UK experts or other agencies working on this issue?

The Minister noted the impending monsoon season, and we are all aware of the risk that those heavy rains could turn the existing humanitarian crisis in the refugee camps into something even more catastrophic, including through the spread of waterborne disease. What assessment have the Minister’s officials, and their counterparts in the United Nations, made of the current shortfall in humanitarian funding to support the refugees, and of the expected shortfall if the monsoon season makes the crisis worse? If those numbers are as high as many of us fear, what emergency action will the Government take with our international partners to try to plug those gaps?

Finally, we must return to how we can best ensure the safe, voluntary and dignified repatriation of and a sustainable future for the Rohingya refugees, and how we can ensure that those responsible for the atrocities against them are brought to justice. I appreciate what the Minister has said about the pressure the United Kingdom has exerted behind the scenes at the United Nations in terms of setting up the fact-finding mission and obtaining the Security Council presidential statement. However, he will understand the long-standing view on the Labour Benches that it is time to go further and be more public in using the UK’s formal role as penholder on Myanmar on the United Nations Security Council to table resolutions on these vital issues: first, to table a resolution setting out the terms under which the repatriation
process should proceed, and the future rights and protections that must be accorded to the Rohingya refugees, obliging the Myanmar authorities to accede to the terms. Secondly, at the appropriate time, a resolution should be tabled referring Myanmar to the International Criminal Court, so that the generals, who this week scandalously dismissed the UN’s claims of ethnic cleansing and genocide by saying the Rohingya had burned down their own houses, can be brought to account.

The Minister spoke with candour on that second point, admitting that such a resolution would be difficult to get past the Security Council. I ask him to expand on that. What steps have the Government taken to engage with Myanmar’s near neighbour China and did the Prime Minister raise this issue with the Chinese on her recent trip?

Many of us fear that, if we do not act quickly to break the stalemate, especially with the monsoon season coming, we will have these types of updates for too many months to come, and the humanitarian crisis the Minister described will only get worse.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): May I just give a little bit of advice to both Front Benches? The speeches are meant to be 10 and five minutes. I think one was nearly 16 and the other was seven. I did not want to stop them, because this is a very important subject, but I would like us to keep to that in future.

Mark Field: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think that the Speaker’s Office was made aware that we wanted to have a slightly longer statement.

I appreciate the hon. Lady’s kind words, which were broadly supportive of what we are trying to do. I am very keen, as far as we can, to work together on this issue. I appreciate that, inevitably, these issues can be partisan, but I think there is a way in which this House can express its strong views, not least given our penholder status. Let me touch, if I may, on some of the broader issues she raised.

On sexual violence, I will come back to the hon. Lady with details of how many civilian experts we have on the ground, what their situation is and what work is being done. We are confident that significant progress has been made. As she will be aware, Rohingya women and children remain very vulnerable to gender-based violence and sexual exploitation. The Department for International Development is to a large extent leading the way in supporting and working very closely with a range of organisations, even if they are not necessarily from the UK, to provide specialist help for survivors of sexual violence. This help includes some 30 child friendly spaces to support children with protective services, psychological and physiological support, 25 women’s centres, which are offering safe space and support to the activities of women and girls, and case management for the 2,190 survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Some 53,510 women are being provided with midwifery care and we are helping to fund the provision of medical services, counselling and psychological support. If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will come back to her in writing with further details of the issues she raised on that point.

The impending cyclone and monsoon season is a matter of grave concern. Working with international partners, the UK has already done a huge amount with agencies to ensure that a quarter of a million people will continue to have access to safe drinking water throughout the rainy season. We have also supported cholera, measles and diphtheria vaccination campaigns. We are putting some pressure on the Bangladeshi authorities to try to ensure that a little more space is cleared for further camps, if existing camps become uninhabitable. I should perhaps also say that, along with my colleague in the House of Lords, Lord Ahmad, I hope to meet the Bangladeshi Foreign Secretary immediately after this statement. He is the most senior civil servant, as the hon. Lady will understand, with foreign affairs responsibilities. I have met him on a couple of occasions, both in Dhaka and here in London. I will be meeting him at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and I undertake to discuss these urgent concerns about cyclone-related issues.

On returns, let me first confirm that at a meeting in China in February the Prime Minister made it very clear in private session with her counterparts the concerns we feel about this issue and have tried to get through the UN process. I am hopeful that we will be able to continue to put pressure on—unfortunately, the veto is an issue in relation to not just China but Russia—not least with the interim report being finalised as this sad situation remains high profile. I had hoped to come to the House on Monday immediately after the interim report, but with all the other business, it has been the first available opportunity to be able to speak to the House. One of the biggest fears I think all of us have had—certainly, it is a fear shared by the Bangladeshi authorities—is that the eyes of the world will move away from the Rohingya and on to other issues. I believe they will return if things go as dismally as we fear they might during the cyclone season. We will keep the pressure on. I do not rule out the idea that we will work towards preparing a UN Security Council resolution to call the Burmese authorities to account.

The hon. Lady mentions Magnitsky. She is absolutely right that that provides an opportunity. However, it is probably fair to say that, unlike many former Russian citizens who are in this country, many senior Burmese figures do not have huge financial interests in this country in assets, wanting to arrive here for a visa or having children in schools. I do not think that if the Magnitsky amendment is passed into law it will be a silver bullet. I do not think it will make a massive difference in terms of sanctions against senior Burmese figures, but we will continue to work on it.

Finally, on the returns process, which other Members may wish to raise, the hon. Lady will be aware that the Governments of Bangladesh and Burma signed a repatriation agreement as long ago as 23 November. To be absolutely honest, it is not just the UK that thinks that northern Rakhine is simply not safe for returns. I think everybody shares that assessment. I spoke at great length with Lord Darzi, who is on the advisory commission, at the Foreign Office last week. He had been on the ground and spoke to people there. It is clear that we are, I fear, a considerable way from there being any possibility of safe, voluntary or dignified returns to Rakhine state.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Tatmadaw has form and we should not forget the plight of the Christian community in northern Kachin, to whom we owe a particular debt of honour. They have
been dispossessed by violence and prevented from returning by mining interests, and there being a sinister link between the two.

Mark Field: My right hon. Friend makes an entirely fair point, which was alluded to by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland. He is right. The issues around minority communities are not restricted to the Rohingya. The Rohingya are the largest single community to be treated in an appalling way by the Burmese authorities, but there are other minorities, Christian and others, who are being persecuted. We will continue to keep the pressure on the Burmese authorities.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement. It goes without saying in this House that this humanitarian tragedy has reached an unthinkable scale and the atrocities are almost unspeakable. As he knows, only last week, I visited the mega-camp in Bangladesh with the International Development Committee. The enormity of what we saw, with almost 1 million people in three or four square miles, was unbelievable. I am lost for words in trying to explain just how big this humanitarian emergency is. Five hundred people are still coming across the border every week from Burma to Bangladesh and their stories are the same—of atrocities, loss, murder, rape, and the rest, as we have been hearing in previous months.

Right now, we face an imminent challenge and we are running out of time, weeks away from a monsoon impending and a potential cyclone. I want to hear more from the Minister about what specifically is being done on that. Flooding and imminent landslides could both lead to further devastating loss of life. The reckoning is that more than 200,000 will be affected, and obviously, there could be subsequent waterborne diseases. The UK Government plan to work towards returning refugees to Burma. I know that needs to be slow and considered, but we in the Scottish National party are cautious and share the view of the UN and aid groups that this could thrust the refugees back into danger. Last week, we even heard from a Bangladeshi Minister that it is unsafe for the Rohingya to return.

We welcome the report by the UN fact-finding mission in Burma, which adds to the overwhelming evidence that what has taken place is a human rights violation of the most serious kind, likely amounting to crimes under international law. Earlier, we heard the UN special rapporteur state that the conflict had the “hallmarks of genocide”. As I speak today, my city of Dundee is considering the withdrawal of the freedom of the city that was given to Aung San Suu Kyi for human rights and democracy and for upholding international law. For my constituents, that is profoundly important.

The Minister said that he does not agree with the conclusion of the Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry that the UK failed to see this crisis coming. However, this conclusion is backed by overwhelming evidence. The unchecked hate speech, lack of Government control over security forces, the presence of non-state and pseudo-non-state armed groups, growing nationalist support of the military and increased incidents of identity-based attacks were all serious indicators of the escalating violence against the Rohingya. The UK does not currently integrate an index of risk factors for identity-based violence, even though that would help to predict incidents of violent extremism, mass atrocities and institutional violence. I urge that the work on this index starts immediately, and I urge the Minister to announce today that he will begin the work on it.

Finally, will the Minister set out today what lessons have been learned from these events regarding atrocity prevention? How will these lessons be applied in Burma and elsewhere in future?

Mark Field: I thank the Scottish National party spokesman for his kind words about the work we are trying to do together across Parliament. On cyclone preparedness, the UK is working with a number of partners in Bangladesh on strengthening infrastructure and ensuring that at-risk households are provided with shelter materials. Part and parcel of the process is trying to persuade the Bangladeshi authorities. I will do that in the meeting this afternoon and express the strength of feeling that we need to open up more space, so that the confinement that the refugees are under, which could be calamitous if a cyclone hits part of that area, is restricted as far as possible.

I did not want to be in any way critical of what the Foreign Affairs Committee concluded, not least with its Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), sitting on the Benches behind me. We have not been quiet about this issue in Burma and the fact that the Rohingya were continually going to be under pressure. We would contend that it is not the case that this notion came out of blue sky.

Being candid, I think everyone had a sense of wishful thinking. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), who spoke earlier, had a DFID role and was a Minister at one time—I am not in any way blaming him, but the whole international community was so hopeful that after decades of military rule in Burma, going back to 1962 and, arguably, to the creation of the state in 1947-48, we would suddenly have a big surge towards democracy. The constitution that we in the international community were all party to seeing set up, I am afraid, provided massive difficulties almost from day one, when Aung San Suu Kyi became State Councillor. The power that was still in the hands of the military meant that we overlooked, for example, the Rohingya’s rights. They were not included in the census and were not allowed to vote in the first elections. In many ways, we recognise with hindsight that that gave succour to the Burmese military in thinking that they could get away with what they have now got away with. There was a lot of wishful thinking. With the best motivation in the world, we wanted to see some progress. After decades of the darkness of being a military dictatorship—almost a closed state—we looked upon any advancement as something that we should grasp hold of. That is a lesson we shall learn for the future.

I want to work with many non-governmental organisations—Protection Approaches is a good example—to work towards having a set of policies with which we can look at conflict prevention for the future. However, many hundreds of lives have been blighted and tens of thousands of lives have been ended by this dreadful event, and we know that this is still an ongoing situation. The best legacy that we can give to the Rohingya is not just to get a better life for them and ensure that they
have citizenship and a stake in longer-term Burmese society, but to ensure that the sacrifices and hardship that they have gone through can be used as an example to make sure that the rest of the world makes those changes. Ultimately, that is a partly academic, practical exercise, and we need to work within the international community to bring that to pass.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I visited the Kutupalong Rohingya refugee camp in October last year, and I believe that I am right in saying that it is one of the largest and most congested refugee camps in the whole world. It is equivalent to a city the size of Bristol, yet it has no hospital, inadequate schooling facilities and very few roads. It seems that the biggest risk to the Rohingya is an outbreak of disease in this massive refugee camp, and that the No. 1 humanitarian priority is that the camp is broken up, with extra space found, so that if the worst comes to the worst, an outbreak could be contained.

**Mark Field:** My hon. Friend speaks with great knowledge about this matter and I very much agree with him. Clearly the international community will have to work with the Bangladeshi Government on that issue, but we are focused on it. We have a good track record on disease prevention. We can be very proud of the work that we did to nip the diphtheria outbreak in the bud, but I am by no means complacent that similar diseases such as cholera, as well as diphtheria, will not be prominent in the months to come.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement and echo his words in describing this as a “humanitarian catastrophe”. I also reinforce what the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) said about the sheer scale of the camp—it is 10 times the size of the Zaatri refugee camp in Jordan and double the size of the city of Liverpool. I welcome the fact that the Minister is meeting the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister this afternoon, but we really need to say to Bangladesh at the most senior level that more needs to be done to prepare for the rainy season, cyclones and the monsoon. I urge our Prime Minister to ask the Bangladeshi Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, to take a personal lead, because otherwise that humanitarian catastrophe will be multiplied in the weeks and months ahead.

**Mark Field:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words; he is absolutely right. I know that the International Development Committee, which he chairs, has done tremendous work. I only wish that it had been able to go to the other side of the border—that would have been very instructive—but the work it has done in Bangladesh is of tremendous importance.

We are both aware that the heavy rains and cyclones could have a severe impact on the nearly 1 million Rohingya who are already in Cox’s Bazar, as well as the host communities, because it is important to factor in the communities living in that part of Bangladesh. It is to the great credit of those communities and the authorities in Bangladesh that, hitherto, there have not been tensions between the two, but we cannot take that for granted. We are already working in great earnest with the Government of Bangladesh and humanitarian partners to improve preparedness. I will ensure that the

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his statement and thank him for keeping the House updated on the plight of the Rohingya Muslims. He also spoke about the plight of other minorities—the Hindus and Buddhists—and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) mentioned the Christian community. Will the Minister say more about what will be done, by both the United Nations and the British Government, to protect those minorities, who currently do not seem to have any defenders at all?

**Mark Field:** I think it is unfair to suggest that they have no defenders, although I accept that, understandably and rightly, the focus has been on the Rohingya, who are a larger group that has been excluded from that society as being stateless. The Hindu, Buddhist and Christian groups that are being persecuted—the Buddhists within Rakhine, rather than in Burma as a whole—have at least some citizenship rights.

We will do our level best. I know that my hon. Friend is aware of our work in relation to freedom of religion and belief. We feel very strongly about that issue, and not just in the context of Burma. One of our slight concerns relates to the other things that are happening in that part of the world. We are seeing the deterioration of human rights in Sri Lanka, and even in Thailand. There is suddenly a sense of the Buddhist community being against the Muslim community permeating in areas beyond the Burmese borders. That, I think, could lead to a calamitous state of affairs.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): As the Minister has reminded us, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar has described the conflict as having “the hallmarks of genocide”. It is therefore imperative that everything is done to bring the various actors to justice at its conclusion. The Minister was right to mention the challenges that we face in seeking that end, but there is an immediate issue. The best and most compelling evidence that will inform any future prosecutions is to be found now. What are the Government doing to ensure that every piece of evidence for future use is sought and acquired?

**Mark Field:** The right hon. Gentleman can be assured that we are doing our level best to ensure that there is a full collation of all the evidence to which he refers. We must be patient and recognise that this is a painstaking process. I wish that we could move more quickly to meet concerns about the process of dealing with genocide or crimes against humanity, but we are collecting the evidence very patiently and painstakingly and, when the moment arises, we shall be able to return to that process.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Let me first apologise, particularly to my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), for the fact that the Foreign Affairs Committee will not be presenting its latest report to the House this week, because no time has been allotted for Backbench Business. Let me also
declare an interest: my father is among those who are currently training Burmese lawyers, and is serving as one of the judges sent to Burma by Her Majesty's Government.

What is the Minister doing to work with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations? His work so far has been exemplary, and, indeed, the co-operation of the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) has been fantastic—this is a joint effort—but does he agree that ASEAN has a particular role to play, and that Britain's role, alongside ASEAN's, could be game-changing?

Mark Field: I agree that ASEAN's role could be game-changing. My hon. Friend will appreciate that there is, rightly, an approach that ASEAN countries want to work together, but there are clearly tensions. Owing to the differences between the positions of, for example, Indonesia on the one hand, and Malaysia and Thailand on the other, it is more difficult for them to adopt an agreed single line on this matter. I raised that issue with the Foreign and Commonwealth Minister when I met ASEAN figures both here and internationally. I shall be working with Singapore, which is chairing ASEAN this year, and there will be a big meeting at the end of the year. That is some way away, but I think that this will be an increasingly important issue to raise. I hope that there will also be an opportunity for it to be raised prominently at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, at which three ASEAN members—Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei—will be present.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): May I emphasise the urgency of addressing at the highest level the imminent threat from the monsoon rains and the cyclone season? Anyone who has seen the camps in Cox's Bazar, as the International Development Committee did last week, will know that the flimsy plastic and bamboo sheds that are built on loose earth on deforested land will be simply swept away, and thousands of people could die. When the Minister raises this issue with the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, may I urge him to stress that it is not simply the intention of bringing more land into play that is important? What is most important is action to achieve that end—and action within days or weeks, not months.

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman has seen what is happening with his own eyes, and he is absolutely right. This could be a calamitous situation. The deforestation makes much of the land unviable, other than on an emergency short-term basis. I will do as the hon. Gentleman requests.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I echo the Minister's tribute to the people and Government of Bangladesh for the generosity that has been shown to the Rohingya refugees. What realistic prospect does he see of any significant numbers of returns to Rakhine state in, say, the next 12 months? He was right to highlight the pernicious effects of the 1982 citizenship law. Does he see any realistic prospect of that being reformed, as he rightly proposed in his statement?

Mark Field: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the wheels of diplomacy sometimes move slowly, but that is not to suggest that we will not be patient and work towards this. I believe that there need to be returns soon. There is, of course, a political imperative: an election is coming up in Bangladesh, and I think that that is one of the reasons why the Bangladeshi authorities will be keen to see some movement towards returns. The fundamental point, however, is that we cannot accept returns—the international community will not accept them—unless they are “safe, dignified and voluntary”.

I strongly believe that it will take time to work through the issue of citizenship. It has been a running sore since Burma was created, and certainly since the 1982 compact. However, the single most obvious and fundamental aspect of the Kofi Annan report is that unless we get the issue of citizenship right, we will not achieve the reform in Rakhine that is required. We will therefore work with all our international partners to try to ensure that genuine progress is made as quickly as possible.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I think that we all appreciate that the Minister is doing a difficult and frustrating job. Is he satisfied that the Bangladeshi Government have the resources to deal with the situation, or will the Rohingya people have to be moved to safer ground? Can he give us an assurance in that regard?

Mark Field: To be candid, I cannot give such an assurance, but, again, we will be making the case. I think that everyone is well aware of climatic conditions such as monsoons and cyclones. Some of those conditions are very severe while others are less so, but in any event we are heading into that season, and the issue is therefore at the forefront of the minds of all concerned.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I thank the Minister both for his comprehensive statement and for the work that has already been done in Bangladesh. When I met representatives of World Vision this week, they told me that they were extremely concerned about the number of bodies that are buried in shallow graves throughout the camps. The monsoon rains are imminent, and waterborne diseases could be spread if the bodies are exposed. What work is being done in that specific regard, both with the Bangladeshi authorities and with local communities?

Mark Field: To be candid—again—I am not sure exactly what work is being done, but I am sure that World Vision is working with many other non-governmental organisations on the ground, and that those concerns will have been raised with the Bangladeshi authorities. If that turns out not to be the case, the hon. Lady will have been able to raise the matter on the Floor of the House, and I will ensure that it is raised at the highest level.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement. I especially commend his point that returns must be voluntary, but that, of course, means that they are very unlikely to happen. It is unrealistic to suggest that 700,000 traumatised people could be told, “Please go back to face the guns and the rapists that sent you away in the first place.”

There will be pressure—the Bangladeshi authorities, who I think have behaved admirably, will understandably want to see returns—but should it not be recognised...
that if there are to be returns, there must be security guarantees, and that those guarantees must be properly underwritten? They will not be for the short term; they will be for decades to come.

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we would not seek for returns to be anything other than voluntary, so we must be patient.

It is also worth pointing out that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has been engaged in a concerted effort of lobbying other nations. Certainly since the Foreign Secretary arrived back, this is an issue that we raise not just with ASEAN states, but with countries such as China, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, to make it clear that we need collectively to work—potentially as a matter of great urgency—both on the humanitarian side, which is where I think the urgency will be needed, and on the diplomatic side, where we will have to be in it for the long haul. That is not being pessimistic; I am hopeful. I want things to work and I would love to see solutions sooner rather than later, but the hon. Gentleman makes the valid point for the whole House that this issue will, I suspect, be high profile for many years to come before there are the voluntary returns that we all want.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement. Some of my constituents in Ipswich have relatives who are resident in Bangladesh and are providing voluntary aid and support in the camps there. While working on the ground in the camps, they do not always see where the money is being spent. What communications can the Government make available to reassure people in this country that the British aid being given in the camps is used effectively so that they will have the reassurance they need to make further donations to help the Rohingya people?

Mark Field: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents. The great majority of Bangladeshi Britons come from the north-east of the country in Sylhet, rather than the area around Cox’s Bazar, although some are from near there. Although £59 million is a large sum in the context of international contributions, it does not take us very far when we are dealing with 600,000, 700,000 or 800,000 Rohingya. The message I ask the hon. Gentleman to take back to his constituents is that we are doing our absolute level best. We are working hard on the ground, but the sheer scale of what is required might give rise to a sense of hopelessness, and I ask the hon. Gentleman to implore his constituents not to turn away from this very real humanitarian calamity.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call the ever-patient Nic Dakin.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

This humanitarian disaster shocks us all, but none are more affected than the Bangladeshi diaspora, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) pointed out. I welcome the fact that the Minister will meet Bangladesh’s Foreign Secretary soon after this statement. As well as urging Bangladesh to organise and prepare as well as possible for the cyclone and monsoon season, will he offer whatever additional support the UK can give to help with those preparations not only in terms of assistance, but as part of our leadership role as UN penholder on this matter?

Mark Field: I know that you have been asking for brevity in my responses, Mr Deputy Speaker, and without in any way being disrespectful to the hon. Gentleman, I can give a brief response to his question: we are very happy to do that. I very much hope that we can continue to make huge humanitarian contributions, which will require more money from both us and the international community in the months and years ahead.
European Affairs

[Dw 2]

Debate resumed (Order, 14 March).

Question again proposed.

That this House has considered European Affairs.

1.14 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):

I am delighted to open the second day of this very important debate. At the outset I want to set out the status of our negotiations and reiterate this Government’s vision for a future economic partnership with the EU. I will in particular focus on the important issue of financial services within any future trade agreement, and remind the House that we have been very clear that the decision to leave the EU does not mean some loveless divorce or division. There is indeed no need for this, given that the economies of the UK and the EU are inextricably connected, and given our long and shared history of common values and shared challenges, and I have no doubt that any future economic partnership must recognise and reflect these facts.

We stand at the threshold of a new beginning with our European partners, and a renewal of our commitment to ensure the continued prosperity and stability of both the UK and the EU. Before I turn to our future economic partnership with Europe, it is important to set out just how far we have come, and what awaits us as we progress our discussions.

The agreement in December was a significant step forward. The joint report issued by the UK and the EU set out progress on three areas: a fair deal on citizens’ rights that enables families who have built their lives together in the EU and the UK to stay together; a partnership with Europe, it is important to set out just how far we have come, and what awaits us as we progress our discussions.

The agreement in December was a significant step forward. The joint report issued by the UK and the EU set out progress on three areas: a fair deal on citizens’ rights that enables families who have built their lives together in the EU and the UK to stay together; a financial settlement that honours the commitments we undertook as members of the EU, as we said we would; and an agreement in relation to Northern Ireland. We are confident that this collaborative spirit, which led to the December agreement, will endure as we take our approach forward into the next phase, including at the European Council next week.

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

On this concept of a collaborative, open spirit, trying to find solutions and securing frictionless trade, the Minister will have seen today’s Sky News report that the Government are insisting on non-disclosure agreements with a variety of industry groups, transport bodies, hauliers and others in trying to find their way through. Why are the Government insisting on gagging business organisations in that way?

Mel Stride:

It is standard practice for the Government to use non-disclosure agreements, and delivering a seamless post-Brexit border is a top priority for us. Non-disclosure agreements with key delivery partners for the border are crucial to the open exchange of information and opinion on options and scenarios, and they ensure that all planning negotiations and decisions are based on what is achievable and most appropriate for the UK to ensure a safe and secure border.

In respect of our future trading relationship, draft EU negotiating guidelines have been circulated to the EU for comment, and we expect final guidelines to be formally adopted next week at the March European Council. We trust that these will provide the flexibility to allow the EU to think creatively about our future relationship, and, looking ahead, we are confident that we will conclude a deal on the entire withdrawal agreement by the European Council in October. This confidence is not just grounded in our mutual interest of striking a deal, but also because we enter these negotiations from a point of striking similarity: our rules, regulations, and commitment to free trade and high standards are the same. So, as we build this new relationship, we are doing so from a common starting point.

The next milestone in the negotiations will be an agreement of an implementation period. We saw the implementation period prioritised in the Chancellor’s Mansion House speech and the Prime Minister’s Florence speech, alongside a frictionless customs arrangement and a comprehensive agreement on trade in goods and services. The implementation period is the essential first step to ensure that we can all experience an orderly exit from the EU, plan accordingly, and enjoy certainty during the transition.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con):

How can we possibly agree an implementation period when at the moment we do not have anything to implement?

Mel Stride:

While being ingenious in his use of language, my right hon. Friend will I am sure agree with me that the purpose of the implementation period is to make sure we have a period of certainty for business, so that when we end up with our final withdrawal agreement we only have one set of changes to make from where we are now to where we will be at that point. That is the purpose of the implementation period.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con):

I do not want to alarm you, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I completely agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), which may be a first in this sort of debate—[Interruption.] He is in a state of high shock. In all seriousness, this is an implementation period—the clue is in the name—but many of us fear that by October we will have achieved nothing more than a woolly set of heads of agreement and that there will be little to implement. How does the Minister see things panning out in reality?

Mel Stride:

Whether it is a transition period, an implementation period or whatever period one seeks to term it, the important thing is to understand what the period is about, and we have always been clear about that. It is a period in which we will remain closely involved—similar to how we are at the moment—so that when we move into the post-transition or implementation period we have undergone just one set of changes and that we have certainty in the interim for British businesses, which is exactly what they have been telling us they would like.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con):

I repeat these words:

“I propose that we aim for a trade agreement covering all sectors and with zero tariffs on goods. Like other free trade agreements, it should address services.”

Those are the words used by President Tusk in introducing the guidelines, which seem to accept the principle that there should be a comprehensive free trade agreement between the United Kingdom and the EU.
Mel Stride: My hon. Friend makes an important point and, as I will say later in my speech, there is every reason to move towards a comprehensive free trade agreement covering not just goods, but services.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Given that nearly half of our trade is with the EU and that 40% of that trade is in services, does the Minister agree that the level of services coverage in, for example, CETA is not deep enough or broad enough to recognise adequately the mutual trade between the UK and the EU in services?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We will be seeking a unique deal for our country that recognises the prime importance of financial services both to our country and to the European Union and of the provision of competitive finance to the EU’s businesses and consumers. She mentioned CETA, and the relevant point there is that the negotiations, which were led by Michel Barnier, recognised the importance of attempting to include areas such as financial services, which is exactly what we will seek in the negotiations that will now follow.

We have the reassurance that the UK and the EU both issued a published text on the approach to the implementation period that reflects the significant common ground between us. The text would codify an implementation period that preserves the current status quo for business and consumers, is time-limited but also provides a sufficient window for the EU and UK to put new processes and systems in place, and ensures continuity in the application of international agreements. As a third country, the UK will have the ability to use the period to negotiate and sign new trade deals, while reflecting the fact that we cannot bring these agreements into legal effect until after the end of the period. We will also introduce a new registration scheme for EU citizens arriving post-Brexit but during the implementation period, when EU citizens should be able to continue to visit, live and work in the UK as they do now.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Minister has referred to the potential opportunities to negotiate new trade deals after we leave the European Union, and one of his colleagues has been keen to big up the prospect of the riches to be had from that. Can the Minister name any country in the world that has indicated it would be more likely to give a beneficial trade deal to the United Kingdom on our own than it would be to negotiate a deal with the world’s biggest single internal market?

Mel Stride: What I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that a large number of trade missions have been led by the Department for International Trade and its Secretary of State. We have had extremely encouraging discussions with a large number of important potential future trading partners with whom we may be seeking free trade agreements. As I have said, we will be able to negotiate deals within the implementation period, although they will not come into effect until we are beyond that point.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Is the Minister aware of the article on the front page of The Times today, which says that Brussels has now agreed that Britain can sign free trade deals without the approval of the European Union? Will he update the House on the status of the situation? What does it mean for our free trade policy?

Mel Stride: I believe that my hon. Friend is right. I certainly read that article this morning, and if what it says is the case, that would be good and sensible news, because it would be entirely logical that we should be in a position to go out and negotiate free trade agreements during any implementation period, although we respect the fact that the deals would not be switched on until we were beyond that point.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): As a part of the customs union, we have trade deals with 50-odd countries across the world, and I understand that they are worth some £140-odd billion per annum in UK trade exports. Will the priority during the implementation period be to renegotiate and sign deals with all those countries with which we currently have a trade deal? We know that some of them want to renegotiate the terms and want greater access to UK markets as a result. How many of those deals are we going to be able to renegotiate and sign before we actually leave the European Union?

Mel Stride: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that it is an absolute priority for the Government to ensure the consistency and continuity of the existing arrangements as they pertain between the European Union and other countries. I see no reason why we should not benefit from those arrangements, just as those countries will indeed benefit from arrangements with us as we go forward.

We have proposed practical solutions to help deliver a smooth departure from the EU. One such solution is the introduction of a joint committee to resolve issues or disputes that may arise during the implementation period. That approach is a common feature of international trade agreements. The joint committee would, for example, allow the UK to raise concerns regarding new laws that might be harmful to our national interest. We will also continue to discuss our involvement in relevant bodies as a third country during the period to ensure that EU rules and regulations continue to operate coherently.

It is in the interests of both the UK and EU to agree the precise terms of the implementation period as quickly as possible. We are close to delivering that, and we expect it to be formalised at the European Council meeting next week. The implementation period is key to forging the best possible future relationship, giving businesses and Government the time and certainty to plan for Brexit, and preparing the UK for its status as an independent trading nation. It will be a bridge from where we are now to where we want to be in the future—on exit, on day one, and beyond.

Looking further forward, it is crucial that talks progress so that we can agree the terms of our future relationship with the EU. We are now moving at pace to set the parameters of an economic partnership. As a Treasury Minister, I am particularly focused on how our economies will interact and grow together. As the Prime Minister said in her speech on 2 March, the UK is seeking the broadest and deepest possible agreement that covers more sectors and co-operates more fully than any other...
free trade agreement. A key component of any future agreement should be the inclusion of services, particularly financial services.

Jonathan Edwards: The Minister is being extremely generous in taking interventions. Taking him back to the implementation period and the negotiation of trade deals, will the priority be renegotiating the trade deals that we already have with all these third countries via the customs union or negotiating new trade deals with countries such as the United States and China?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman will understand that both are an extremely high priority. We will be pursuing both avenues vigorously.

As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made clear in his Canary Wharf speech last week, financial services is a sector that calls for close cross-border collaboration. The Chancellor also reiterated that it is simply not credible to suggest that a future deal could not include financial services. It is in the interests of both parties to ensure that the EU can continue to access and enjoy the significant benefits afforded by our financial services hub, because it is a regionally and globally significant asset, serving our continent and beyond, and near-impossible to replicate.

The UK can claim excellence in many areas, but in trade in financial services we are truly the global leader. We manage £1.5 trillion of assets on behalf of EU clients, and 60% of all EU capital markets activity is conducted here in the United Kingdom. Around two thirds of debt and equity capital raised by EU corporates is facilitated by banks right here in the UK. The huge economies of scale have led to London’s dominant position in EU financial services. As the Chancellor made very clear last week, we should be under no illusions about the significant costs if this highly efficient shared market is fragmented—costs that will ultimately fall to consumers and companies right across Europe.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a very important point. As the Chancellor set out, those costs are many billions of pounds. One example is the proposed relocation of clearing houses, with an effective cost of some £25 billion a year. Does my right hon. Friend agree in addition that it is critical to have continuity for the legal instruments that underpin financial services, and that continuity of access for legal services must therefore be inextricably linked?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises an important point about the significance of financial services, not just to us but to our European partners. On his specific point about regulatory continuity, we are considering the detail of that at the moment. We will certainly look at the prospect of returning to the matter on Report of the relevant Bill.

The UK stands ready to engage on a future trade agreement—one that includes financial services. Our overarching vision is for an economic partnership—including a future trade agreement—that delivers the maximum possible benefits for both our economies in all sectors, respects the integrity of each other’s institutions and seeks to strengthen, not weaken, the prosperity of Europe as a whole. Despite that, some still question the possibility of reaching such an agreement or insist that a trade deal cannot include financial services. The Chancellor addressed those sceptics in his speech last week, when he said that “every trade deal the EU has ever done has been unique”.

The existing models do not represent the best way forward; nor do they provide a useful precedent to form the basis of any future agreement. Joining the EEA would not give the UK enough control, and a CETA-style deal would present too low a level of market access. The EU and the UK come to the negotiating table from the unique position of having the same rules and regulations on day one, not to mention our deeply interconnected economies. Unlike when other countries negotiate free trade agreements, this is not about aligning two totally different systems. Any new trading agreement should reflect the starting point of deep and historic convergence. We understand that, over time, there will be points of inevitable divergence, so we recognise that any future agreement should set out a clear approach to that aspect.

Our country seeks the deepest and broadest agreement possible—a bold economic partnership that is of greater scope and ambition than any comparable arrangement in history. The ambition of our vision reflects the scale of our mutual interest, our shared history and all that we can achieve together as good friends and trusted neighbours. Leaving the European Union represents an opportunity to chart a prosperous future. Along with my colleagues in Government, I have the greatest faith in our country and in our ability to work with others to achieve a deal that provides and endures for us all.

1.33 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): As we mark the halfway point of this general debate, it is worth reflecting on the fact that we have had a number of thoughtful contributions from Members on both sides of the House. Although I welcome any opportunity for Parliament to debate and, I hope, shape Brexit, no one is under any illusions about the fact that over these two days we are doing anything more than filling time to cover the Government’s legislative paralysis. It is just over a year until we leave the European Union. We have a mammoth legislative task ahead of us, but the Government are holding back the Customs Bill and the trade Bill because they are, understandably, afraid of defeat. They have yet to present Bills on migration, fisheries and agriculture; perhaps they are worried about some of the hard truths in those areas.

The Prime Minister was right to say at Mansion House that we need to face hard truths, on the basis of evidence. Not only do I agree with the Prime Minister, but I agree with her former deputy, the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), who said: “If analysis is being produced then publish it. And frankly there will be a big political debate about it. Let’s have this argument in public—that’s what democracies do.”

The country faces critical decisions that will define how we live and our place in the world for generations to come. Honesty, openness and hard truths are the very least that people deserve.

That is why the Opposition pressed for the publication of impact assessments and the Treasury analyses of the future of the economy under the different available
scenarios. Those analyses, which have now been published, make sobering reading. Ministers have said on several occasions—I think this was repeated yesterday—that the three options that the Treasury modelled do not reflect their desired outcome. But the Minister for Trade Policy, the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), yesterday told the House that the Government were seeking an ambitious free trade agreement with the EU. I think that that was repeated this morning. The central model in the Treasury analysis was exactly such an agreement—it was described as the best possible free trade agreement—so it has been modelled. What did that model tell us? Over 15 years, such a free trade agreement with the EU would result in a 5% hit to the economy. That would mean 5% fewer jobs and 5% less money for public services. To paraphrase the right hon. Member for Brxto (Anna Soubry), this must be the first Government in history who are setting as their ambition reducing the size of the UK economy.

At Mansion House, the Prime Minister was honest about the fact that her plans would result in downgraded access to EU markets. What she did not make clear, and what her Cabinet has resisted making public, is just how damaging that version of Brexit would be to the economy. Initially—this feels like some time ago—we heard Ministers talk enthusiastically about their plans for an ambitious free trade agreement with the United States, which would compensate for the damage to our trade with the EU. But according to the Government’s own analysis, even if they achieved that deal, it would boost GDP by just 0.2%. Let us be clear that that would be in return for dismantling our food health and safety standards, among other US demands. We could end up with nothing but a hard border in Ireland if we diverged from EU agricultural standards, and a US deal would require us to do so. If the ongoing negotiations on open skies are anything to go by, the special relationship will not count for much in the cold, hard light of trade negotiations.

It is fascinating to watch how even the more extreme Brexiteers suddenly decide, as the hard truth of the difficulties involved in a US trade deal dawn on them, that the US is not that important after all. On 4 March, we witnessed the spectacle of the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab)—he was speaking as a Government Minister on Radio 5 Live—dismissing the importance of a US deal and saying that “the real opportunities of the future will be with...emerging markets”.

US trade deals, the Northern Ireland peace agreement and Treasury economic analyses have all been casually brushed aside by those who long for the deepest rupture with the EU. But Labour will not do that.

Paul Blomfield: The hon. Gentleman is right to talk about the difficulties that would be faced, and there was naivety on the part of the Government in assuming that these deals can just be rolled forward. This is one of the arguments behind our approach and our policies on the customs union. We want to face the hard truths that the Prime Minister talked about at Mansion House and it is why we believe, along with the CBI and the EEF, that a new customs union with the EU is best for manufacturing and for our economy, and it is the only way of resolving the Northern Ireland border.

John Redwood: Is it not crystal clear to anyone who reads the Labour manifesto that Labour set out its bold vision for an independent UK trade policy—I agreed with some, but not all, of it—but that that would have been completely incompatible with staying in a customs union? It is completely misleading to suggest that it is compatible.

Paul Blomfield: We could draw some interesting conclusions from the Conservative manifesto at the last election, but we all need to face facts and perhaps the Government need to change views in the cold light of those facts. I always find it interesting to take interventions from the right hon. Gentleman. I do not know whether he is still advising—

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con) rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I think the Opposition spokesman is still dealing with the previous intervention, and he may in due course come to another intervention.

Paul Blomfield: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. As I say, I always find it interesting when the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) talks about the interests of the British economy. I do not know whether he is still advising readers, through the Financial Times, to get money out of the country.

John Redwood: As the hon. Gentleman well knows, I never did that. I made a clear statement to the House and he should apologise.

Paul Blomfield: Well, the right hon. Gentleman’s comment in the column in the Financial Times on 3 November 2017, under the heading “Time to look further afield as UK economy hits the brakes”, read: “I sold out of the general share ETFs”—exchange-traded funds—“in the UK after their great performance for the year from early July 2016 when I saw the last Budget and heard the BoE’s credit warnings. The money could be better put to work in places where the authorities are allowing credit to expand a bit, to permit faster growth.”

So I am completely accurate in my quote.

John Redwood: The hon. Gentleman should look at the whole portfolio, which still had massively more in the UK than in the general global representation, and this was nothing to do with Brexit.
Paul Blomfield: I was simply questioning the right hon. Gentleman’s commitment to the economy, and he will note the headline—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman, and all hon. Members, can question other Members’ political attitudes and what they say in this House. What we cannot have is one Member suggesting that another Member has said something, in writing or otherwise, which he says he did not say. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) will not question what I am saying. Mr Blomfield might like to consider just closing this down with a withdrawal of his remark about Mr Redwood.

Paul Blomfield: I thank you for that clarification, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise for any offence, but I was simply quoting from the Financial Times column by the right hon. Gentleman, which said:

“Time to look further afield as UK economy hits the brakes”.

Anna Soubry: I hope we can return to the subject we are meant to be debating today. The hon. Gentleman talks about manifestos, and of course his party failed to get elected on its one. Is he familiar with the Conservative manifesto, which some may say we have drifted a way from to some considerable extent? It made it clear that the Government’s policy, should they be re-elected to the Government’s policy, should they be re-elected to govern our country, was that we would seek a customs arrangement. The hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) will not question what I am saying. Mr Blomfield might like to consider just closing this down with a withdrawal of his remark about Mr Redwood.

Paul Blomfield: I was aware of that manifesto, and the right hon. Lady is right in what she says. I also reflect that the manifesto and the narrative surrounding it sought an overwhelming mandate for a hard Brexit, which the British people failed to give to the Conservative party.

Let me move on to explain why we believe a comprehensive customs union with the EU that replicates the current arrangements also does not weaken our opportunity to develop trade with the rest of the world—certainly not in services. As Germany has shown, we do not need trade deals to develop trade, for example, with China. As the International Trade Secretary acknowledged when he was there with the Prime Minister in February, membership of a customs union will not hold back bilateral trade. Where deals can be done, we think membership of a customs union gives us a stronger hand in trade negotiations, as part of a market of 650 million people, rather than just one of 65 million people, and in maintaining strong EU standards.

Members of this place and the Government must be honest about the fact that any trade agreement—

Vicky Ford: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman and I understand that he is asking to have a customs union with the EU. I listened to the Leader of the Opposition’s speech less than three weeks ago, where he also asked for an exemption on state aid and competition law. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that no country has a customs union with the EU and also has an exemption on state aid and competition law—even Turkey has to apply all EU treaties in this regard?

Paul Blomfield: I recognise that the hon. Lady has enormous experience as a former MEP, but she did ask that question yesterday and my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) replied. I think she is confusing a customs union with a single market requirement—[Interruption.] Let me answer the point in any case. The Leader of the Opposition did raise a concern that we would want assurances on competition policy, but we are absolutely confident that those assurances would be very easy to get and would not be problematic. As I believe was pointed out yesterday, the Leader of the Opposition said on the Peston show in January that we are absolutely confident that nothing in our manifesto would be thwarted by state aid rules.

Vicky Ford: I ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw his accusation that I am somehow confused. It is very clear in reading Turkey’s customs union arrangements that it has to comply with all EU treaty rules on state aid and EU law on competition.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the hon. Lady for that clarification, but we are not seeking a customs union comparable with Turkey’s. We are seeking a comprehensive customs union which replicates the current arrangements that we enjoy with the EU.

Let us move on to another area. We need to be honest about the central issue on which many of those who campaigned to leave focused their campaign and which influenced the votes of many—inmigration. Taking back control of our borders was a powerful promise, creating expectations that the Government really have no plan or intention to deliver. The Government have had control of non-EEA immigration for the past eight years and in every one of those years it was greater than EEA migration.

The Government know that things will not be changing significantly. Two weeks ago, that ardent Brexiteer, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, told the National Farmers Union that “agriculture needs access to foreign workers.”

He promised to maintain that access, for both seasonal and permanent workers. He was echoing the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, who said in Estonia last year that it will take “years and years” for British citizens to fill the employment gaps, and that in the meantime Estonians would be welcome to come to work in the UK. At Mansion House, the Prime Minister talked about a future labour mobility scheme with the EU.

The difficulties of squaring the expectations unleashed by the leave campaign with the interests of the economy are no doubt the reason why the Government have delayed the immigration White Paper, yet again, and do not look set to have a new system in place by the time we depart in March 2019.

Peter Grant: When the hon. Gentleman referred to the numbers of non-EEA migrants, I was a bit concerned that he almost sounded as if he was sympathetic towards the Government’s obsession with treating immigration as a number that should be brought down rather than as something that benefits our nations economically and socially. Will he comment on the speech made by the Leader of the Opposition at the Scottish Labour party conference in Dundee last weekend, in which he referred to the EU as something that allowed low-paid workers to be brought into the UK, thereby driving down wages? Does the hon. Gentleman agree with a
Paul Blomfield: We have always been clear—as indeed, have the Government—about the benefits of migration. That was not what the Leader of the Opposition said in Scotland. There is no evidence that migration drives down wages. There is an issue, which Labour would tackle—it has been in our manifesto for the past couple of elections—on the exploitation of European workers, and those from other countries, in the UK. We need tougher labour-market rules and enforcement to tackle those issues.

The Prime Minister was right to say in Munich and at Mansion House that she was ready to cross her red lines on the European Court of Justice in relation to security, because of the importance of security to this country. She is clearly right: security is vital. I think she was influenced by the fact that, as a former Home Secretary, she had an intimate understanding of the issues and recognised the consequences of failing to reach an accommodation. If security is vital to this country, as it is, is not the economy, too?

The Prime Minister was right to talk about hard truths, because the British people, whether they voted leave or remain, will not thank politicians who deliver a damaging Brexit on the basis of a false prospectus. The former Prime Minister John Major was right, too, when he said that it is right not only to speak truth to power, but to speak truth to the people. Let us face up to the hard facts: there will be no Brexit dividend for public services, as the Chancellor confirmed again on Tuesday; there will be no significant change to migration; there are no real red lines on the European Court of Justice; and there will be huge damage to the economy, according to the Government’s own analysis.

It does not have to be like that. If the Prime Minister had said, “This country voted to leave the European Union, but it was a close vote. It was a mandate to go, but not a mandate for a deep rupture”, and if she had said, “We will leave, but stay close: in a customs union, as close as possible to the single market, a member of a sovereign Europe, as President Macron says—international co-operation. It is plagued by high unemployment, high debts, an ageing population that is isolationist and xenophobic undercurrents and see the vote leave as representing intolerance, prejudice and a call for protectionism. Vote Leave did not campaign for that. We deliberately left the Vote Leave website up—Members can take a look if they like. Vote Leave did not argue for isolation, intolerance or economic protectionism. Those may be the views of a vociferous minority, but the Ashcroft polling that was undertaken at the time of the referendum found that for nearly half of leave voters, the biggest single reason for wanting to vote leave was “the principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK”.

Lest we forget, that is the first context. The debate was about taking back control—about democratic self-government and our country’s right to make its own laws, to decide its own taxation and spending and to choose how it engages with other countries on matters such as trade, foreign affairs and defence. It was about leaving a bloc that is not only in relative economic decline but increasingly in a state of economic and political crisis.

Sir William Cash: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. Had the speeches by Mr Juncker and President Macron about moving towards a more integrated Europe—a sovereign Europe, as President Macron says—been put to the British people before the referendum, we would have had a proportion of the vote vastly greater than 52%.

Mr Jenkin: I was going to make that point later in my speech, but shall no longer do so, for the sake of brevity.

The EU undermines democracy, prosperity and international co-operation. It is plagued by high unemployment, high debts, an ageing population that is much too dependent on state welfare, a dysfunctional euro, unaccountable political institutions and a democratic crisis. It puts up barriers to the combination of world-class universities, technological innovation and venture capital that is fundamental to the technological innovation on which the future of our economy depends.
Since the referendum, we have seen the landmark statements to which the Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), referred. In fact, Martin Schulz, the former President of the European Parliament, wants a full united states of Europe by 2025. The formation of the euro, which was always a political project, transformed the EU, making full integration an imperative to try to prevent the eurozone from breaking up. In the end, the euro will fail anyway, because there is no political consent for the scale of fiscal transfers necessary to compensate for the huge internal trade imbalances.

The second context is economic. Shortly before the referendum, the Treasury forecast that a leave vote would inflict an economic shock on the UK, leading to reduced trade and foreign direct investment, recession, and the loss of 500,000 jobs. I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Member for Sheffield Central, but the Treasury’s analysis has proved to be manifestly wrong. It also ignored the long-term future of global trade and economic growth. Between 2016 and 2017, UK GDP increased by 1.7%, and economic growth continues to surpass expectations. Tax receipts are higher than expected, and the UK is running a current budget surplus for the first time since the year leading up to July 2002—long before the crash, and two years earlier than anticipated just last year. UK unemployment has continued to fall from 8.5% in late 2011 to 4.4% in late 2017, and the unemployment rate was recently at its lowest point since 1975.

Although some businesses are moving parts of their operations to other EU countries, the number of jobs being moved is significantly lower than expected. Foreign direct investment has continued to grow and, since the referendum vote, has been a string of major inward investment decisions. In fact, the year of the referendum, 2016, turned out to be another record year for inward investment. We have seen Wells Fargo committing to a new £300 million London headquarters and Nissan announcing its new Qashqai and X-Trail models to be built in Sunderland, making Sunderland a super plant of 600,000 vehicles a year. In December 2017, GlaxoSmithKline revealed its plans to invest £400 million in the UK’s life sciences sector. At the beginning of this month, Siemens committed to building a £200 million train manufacturing plant in the UK if it wins orders for new rolling stock, and, just last week, Toyota announced that it will build the next generation of its Auris hatchback at its Burnaston plant in Derbyshire, including a £240 million upgrade of the plant.

That is not a matter for gloating or complacency, but it shows that inward investment is not dependent on membership of the EU. What about the longer-term prospects for trade and economic growth? In recent years, UK trade has shown a well-established trend, as the proportion of UK exports sent to the EU has been declining. It peaked at 54% of UK exports in 2006. By 2016, that had fallen to 43%. That decline in the importance of our EU trade has set in despite the UK being in the EU, in a customs union and in the single market. Conversely, over the same period, the non-EU share of UK exports has increased. For example, China’s share of UK exports grew from 1.6% in 2006, worth a mere £5.4 billion, to 3.3%, worth £16.8 billion, in 2016.

Trade has also grown significantly with the Commonwealth. UK exports to Commonwealth countries have increased from 8.8% of our exports, worth £21.5 billion, in 1999 to 8.9%, worth £48.5 billion, in 2016. The Commonwealth is a fast-growing market, reflecting much of our language, values and administrative and constitutional heritage, and therefore has great potential for the UK.

The EU is still the UK’s largest trading partner if taken as a bloc, but if we consider individual countries, the UK’s largest trading partner is the United States of America. It seems to have passed the hon. Member for Sheffield Central by that, while the UK has had a trade deficit with the EU every year since 1999—worth £82 billion in 2016—we achieved a £39 billion trade surplus with non-EU countries in 2016. Outside the EU and the customs union, the UK will be able to develop new trading relationships with many of these countries, but not under his party’s policy. Some of these opportunities, including the possibility of joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the strong prospects of a comprehensive free trade agreement with the US, including financial services, more than match the potential of our existing relationships with the EU.

Outside the EU, the UK will also be better placed to develop trading opportunities with countries in Asia and Africa, where the most rapid growth is expected to occur in the future. When concluding free trade agreements, we can set our own negotiating priorities that best match our economic interests. The EU has historically represented the UK’s interests poorly not just because it is chronically short of money, but because, inevitably, the EU cannot prioritise UK trading interests such as the Scotch whisky, which is, of course, of prime importance to our economy. EU negotiators have to take account of 28 states’ interests, which can be very different from our own, and to reflect the protectionist priorities of producer interests, such as the Italian shoe industry, French agriculture and the German chemicals manufacturers.

**Vicky Ford:** I am very much enjoying listening to my hon. Friend’s speech and hearing him talk about opportunities for trade outside the EU, but, bearing in mind that nearly half our trade is with the EU, that 40% of that is in services, and that services growth has been increasing year on year, does he not agree that we should try to do both? The EU economy is growing at the moment. We can grow our trade with the EU and with other parts of the world if we strike an amicable trading relationship with the EU as we leave.

**Mr Jenkin:** I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. We are on exactly the same page, and we can both support the Prime Minister’s negotiating objectives on that basis.
Returning to the UK the power to negotiate and sign trade deals will not only speed up trade negotiation for the UK, but enable the Government to negotiate in the UK national interest. The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) asked which countries we were talking about. The Department for International Trade is pursuing opportunities in countries around the world, and Australia and Brazil, to name just two, have already expressed an interest in concluding free trade agreements with the UK.

Peter Grant: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way on that point. As a matter of accuracy, may I point out to him that I asked not what countries we hoped to do deals with, but for one country that has said that it will give the United Kingdom a better deal than it would give us as part of the European Union? To date, I have not received a single answer to that question. If he can he tell us now of one country that said that it will give the United Kingdom a better deal than it would give us as part of the European Union?

To date, I have not received a single answer to that question. If he can he tell us now of one country that has said that it will give an isolated Britain on its own a better trade deal than a Britain that is part of the European Union, I am quite sure that his colleagues in the Department for International Trade would be delighted to speak to him.

Mr Jenkin: I think the hon. Gentleman is somewhat playing with words, because nobody will say what kind of deal they will give us until we are actually in the negotiations and making progress. He is asking a question to which he well knows the answer for his own political reasons.

In relation to our trade with the EU, the Prime Minister in her recent speech called for trade at the UK-EU border to be as frictionless as possible. The EU has agreed, as I mentioned earlier, that tariffs and quotas should be avoided and, in the draft negotiating guidelines published earlier this month, it also agreed to the principle of an EU-UK trade deal. Perhaps that is the answer to the hon. Gentleman’s question. There should also be mutual recognition of products and standards, which is no more than the kind of standard agreement that the UK has with many other countries with which it does not have a free trade agreement—incidentally, I think that that is what is meant by a customs arrangement. It means goods need approval in only one country to meet the required regulatory standards in other countries in normal circumstances.

Although we recognise that certain aspects of trade in services are intrinsically linked to the single market, we should note that services trade has nothing whatsoever to do with being in or out of a customs union, because tariffs are not charged on services. The Prime Minister is right to insist that barriers should be introduced only where absolutely necessary. There is no reason for the EU to prevent UK firms from setting up in the EU as we will continue to allow EU firms to set up here. We should agree on an appropriate labour mobility framework and on the recognition of qualifications to provide for the mobility of skilled labour. The Prime Minister also called for the UK and EU economies to remain closely linked in areas including energy, transport, digital, law, and science and innovation. That is perfectly achievable if there is good will on both sides.

The UK is committed to remaining a close friend and neighbour of the EU, and the Prime Minister has made that perfectly clear with a comprehensive economic partnership.

Trade is, of course, of great importance to the economy. In the UK, about 28% of what we produce is sold abroad, and this business activity supports millions of jobs. We also import much of what we consume, and trade allows consumers to access a wider variety of goods, at competitive prices, but the volume of trade is only marginally affected by agreements between countries. Neither the EU nor the UK has a trade agreement with the US, but the US is nevertheless our largest trading partner.

When discussing trade, we must remember that trade agreements are only one factor upon which our economic future depends. How we educate our people, how we regulate our economy, the flexibility of our labour market, and investment in infrastructure, science and technology are far more important to our prosperity than trade agreements. Domestic Government policies have a much bigger impact on economic performance than whether the UK is inside or outside a customs union with the EU. As the hon. Member for Sheffield Central himself pointed out, Germany exports to the rest of the world from within the EU, but with many countries, it does not even have a trade agreement, let alone a customs union agreement.

Let us get all this in proportion. It is far more significant that the UK’s departure from the EU will give us greater flexibility, more responsibility, more accountability and more control over how we manage our economy as we regain: the ability to set our own tariff schedules; the ability to set our own regulatory standards and decide how they should be applied; the unencumbered freedom to set VAT rates; the freedom to relax restrictions placed on UK public procurement; and policy flexibility over things like fishing and farming.

Vicky Ford: I think that my hon. Friend just said that he did not think that there was value in having trade agreements with other third countries. I would like to clarify that, for example, our trade with South Korea has more than doubled—increased by 100%, as the Foreign Secretary said—since the signing of a trade agreement between South Korea and the EU, of which we are a party.

Mr Jenkin: I am not discounting the value of free trade agreements. I am asking that we dispose of some prevalent misconceptions that our prosperity depends only on free trade agreements and being part of the customs union. It is actually relatively at the margins of the overall prosperity of our economy.

It is not necessary to be a very large country or part of a large trade bloc in order to be prosperous. Many very small states export a far higher proportion of their GDP across customs frontiers. For example, Switzerland’s exports are worth 66% of its GDP, and South Korea’s are worth 42%—far higher than the UK’s. Neither of these countries are in any kind of customs union, so they achieve this across traditional customs frontiers and their people have very high living standards. In fact, the EU is Switzerland’s main trading partner, and it is not even a member. Other small trading countries include Singapore, whose exports are actually far bigger, at 172% of GDP, and Hong Kong, whose exports are 187%, because it imports and exports such large volumes. But neither is part of a customs union or of any kind of single market; they just get on with it.
Control over our own laws offers far greater opportunities to develop our economy and export than the removal of customs checks when trading with other countries. The cost of customs processes is low and declining in comparison with other costs, such as anti-competitive regulation, behind-the-border barriers to trade and the reduction of tariff barriers. South Korea had substantial tariff barriers before the free trade agreement. We gain the opportunity to focus on those matters in trade negotiations, alongside investment in science and tech, educating our people, and ensuring flexible labour markets and a competitive tax regime. So much of the debate about leaving the EU lacks this perspective.

Even so, our future opportunities outside the EU are important. Even the European Commission expects 90% of global economic growth over the next 10 to 15 years to be generated outside Europe. The UK can flourish outside the EU, perhaps not with a Corbyn Government—that might be a bit of a problem—but certainly with a sensible Conservative Government. The only question is whether we all work hard to embrace these opportunities or continue trying to hide from them. Outside the EU, instead of pretending that we can insulate ourselves from a rapidly changing world and from the effects of technological and societal change, with a failing model of regulation and centralised power—without all that—we will have the freedom and flexibility to respond, adapt, survive and prosper.

2.14 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate, although I note with sadness that, having set aside two days to debate European affairs, in reality we are all talking about the same European affair. This place has become consumed with Brexit to the extent that other vital matters in the continent of Europe that we would normally have found the time to debate at length are now hardly even mentioned in this place.

Where is the Chamber debate on the persecution of journalists and dissidents in Turkey? Where is the debate on the crackdown of almost neo-fascist proportions in Catalonia, where academics are now being ordered with arrest for the crime of wearing a yellow scarf? Where is the debate on the worryingly regressive steps being taken in Hungary and Poland, so much so that an Irish court this week refused an extradition request to Poland because Ireland can no longer trust the Polish judicial system to give people a fair trial? Where is the debate on the instability that may engulf the Government of Slovakia—a country that was previously a frontier land for the iron curtain and that is now becoming something of a buffer zone between western Europe and the more worrying developments further east?

Had it not been for the appalling incident in Salisbury, it is unlikely that we would even have found time to debate the growing and brutal expansionism of Russia—whether its illegal actions in Ukraine, its equally illegal and covert actions in parts of Georgia or its increasingly threatening behaviour towards the Baltic states. None of these issues is getting anything like the attention in this place that they are entitled to. None is getting the attention that it would have had, had it not been for Brexit taking up so much of everybody’s time and an increasing proportion of the civil service budget in every Department in Whitehall.

I have only listed the European affairs business that we are not talking about. As a number of Labour Members mentioned during business questions today, a whole host of pressing and urgent social issues in these islands are not being debated or talked about. There is inadequate parliamentary scrutiny, and there is inadequate or non-existent legislation to address these problems because everything has been sacrificed on the altar of Brexit. It might not be so bad if, by sacrificing everything to talk about Brexit, there were some signs that we were getting it right. But all the signs are that, having started off getting it wrong by calling the wrong referendum at the wrong time in the wrong circumstances and on the wrong date, things have gone from bad to worse. The catalogue of disastrous misjudgments from the Prime Minister and her predecessor would be hilarious if the consequences were not so disastrous for us economically and, perhaps more importantly, socially.

The referendum was promised to heal divisions within the Conservative party. That has worked well, hasn’t it? The date of the referendum was set because the then Prime Minister was worried that it would have been engulfed by further controversy if there were another summer of refugee disasters in the Mediterranean. It was also deliberately designed to cut across local and national election campaigns in many parts of the United Kingdom. With indecent haste after the referendum and after the Conservative leadership non-contest, the Prime Minister unilaterally—without consultation, as far as I could see—announced the red lines of leaving the customs union and leaving the single market. Those are two lines with which the Prime Minister has painted herself into a corner, and she now wants to blame the Europeans for being unwilling to knock down the walls to get her out of that corner.

John Redwood: The hon. Gentleman made a very good point that there are lots of interesting European issues that are not to do with Brexit. We have a general debate on European affairs, so why does he not talk about them?

Peter Grant: I have raised them all. If it were possible for me to speak quickly enough to debunk even half the nonsense on Brexit that we get from Government Members, I might be able to speak about some of the other issues. The record will show that the Scottish National party has made a number of attempts to raise these issues including, for example, the situation in Catalonia, but we have been pushed back by Her Majesty’s Government at every opportunity.

Having made bad worse by inserting red lines on the customs union and on the single market, the Prime Minister decided to waste three months of negotiating time and six months of parliamentary scrutiny time by having an election to guarantee a three-figure Conservative majority, so that everything else could just be steamrollered through without opposition. That worked even better than the referendum that the Government had to bring the Conservative party together.

As I said, this would be funny if the consequences for 60 million people on these islands, and potentially for several hundred million people in other parts of Europe,
were not so grave. They are so grave that the Government still do everything in their power to prevent us and the people we represent from knowing just how bad their own analysis shows that the position will become. Before the most recent Brexit papers had been fully published, one of the reasons we were told not to be too worried about them was that they only talked about the direct impact of different Brexit scenarios and did not take account of the massive benefit of all the new trade deals we were going to get. Supposedly, everybody would be falling over one another to trade with us after Brexit.

As the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) pointed out, the Government’s analysis indicates that maybe we can increase GDP by as much as 0.75% because of those deals. We could be looking at a Brexit deficit of between 7% and 9% of GDP, depending on just how hard the hard Brexiteers are able to push Brexit. A 0.75% mitigation of that will not do an awful lot of good in the communities that will be devastated by this downturn in our economy.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I ask the hon. Gentleman where he got those figures from?

Peter Grant: I got them from Her Majesty’s Government. If the hon. Gentleman wants to tell me that we should never believe anything that Her Majesty’s Government’s civil servants tell us, that is a debate in itself. Those were the figures that were released, with significant protest, by Her Majesty’s Government to the Brexit Committee. I highly recommend the document to him.

Having had the analysis done at significant expense, those who instructed it to be carried out now seem to want to downplay it—to discredit it. I am pleased that we are no longer hearing, certainly from Ministers, any suggestion that there was anything incompetent, unprofessional or negligent in the performance of those who produced the figures. Of course, those who think that the Treasury’s figures are wildly too pessimistic have had the opportunity to produce their own. We might even find somebody who produces figures that give the lie not only to the Treasury but to the Scottish Government and to any number of other professional bodies. Those bodies do not always agree on the exact figures, but few, if any, are producing a scenario that looks anything other than deeply, deeply damaging for our economy and for the social cohesion of our four nations.

During the Minister’s speech, he took an intervention from one of his colleagues about an article in The Times. Interestingly, his answer seemed to suggest that it was only when they read it in The Times that the Government knew that there had been some softening of the attitude in Brussels towards our ability to negotiate trade deals. Perhaps the Minister could clarify that when he winds up. Would it not be typical of the Government to argue that any of those countries will give us a better deal than we could get by staying exactly where we are. We need to remember that what the Government ask for ain’t necessarily what they are going to get, because there are 27 other Governments over there who are just as determined and just as entitled to look after the interests of the people they represent.

The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) used the tired old argument that we have a trade deficit with the EU and a trade surplus with the rest of the world, and we should therefore concentrate on the rest of the world. I leave aside the fact that some of us do manage to have a trade surplus with the European Union. The logical consequence of that argument is that, if the rest of the world has a huge trade deficit with us, why in the name of goodness would they want to continue trading with us? It is not because Europe is bad at industry and manufacturing that it has a trade surplus with us—it is because it is better at it than we are. The cradle of the industrial revolution has allowed others to overtake us in investment and reinvestment and improving manufacturing efficiency.

Mr Jenkin rose—

Peter Grant: I will give way in a moment.

That is why the Germans can manage to have a trade surplus when we cannot. It is not because they are cheating or because the rules are loaded in their favour; it is because they use more of the profits of their industry to invest in it rather than hiving them off to some kind of offshore tax haven where they are never seen again.

Mr Jenkin: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman had the opportunity to add his rather more socialist point. The problem with the regulatory regime in the European Union is that the whole system is not geared towards our interests and our economy, not least because Germany enjoys a very artificially depressed currency. The Germans have by far the biggest trade surplus as a consequence, and their currency never appreciates because they are in the euro. That has cemented in a completely unfair disadvantage, institutionalised by the European Union.

Peter Grant: So modern industrialised nations that are in the euro do better than those that are not in the euro. That is an interesting argument for the hon. Gentleman to make. I am not saying that I would necessarily agree with its inevitable conclusion, but he does seem to be tying himself in knots very effectively.

I must come back to the comment with which I challenged the Labour spokesperson, because it is very important. When we are talking about the rights of citizens, whether they have lived here their entire lives, come here from other countries, or gone from here to other countries, we should be absolutely uncompromising in celebrating immigration as a good thing. Yes, it sometimes means that bad people come here, but thousands, millions, tens of millions of times more often it means that good people can come here and that our people can go to other places. The exchange of ideas, for example,
is something that we cannot put a price on. As well as
talking about free movement of people, I want us to be
talking about free movement of ideas, because that is
what is at stake more than anything else.

To suggest that immigration is responsible for the low-
paid, insecure jobs on these islands lets the Government
off the hook. Last week, the Leader of the Opposition told
an audience—not a very big audience, admittedly—in
Dundee:

“We cannot be held back—inside or outside the EU—from
…preventing employers being able to import cheap agency labour,
to undercut existing pay and conditions in the name of free
market orthodoxy.”

I am disappointed that Labour Front Benchers have not
apologised for that and invited their leader to withdraw,
as a lot of their Back Benchers have. It is not the
European Union that is responsible for low pay on
these islands; it is successive Governments who eventually
introduced a minimum wage but left us with one that is
still not enough for people to live on. It is not the
European Union that allows employers and agencies to
exploit vulnerable, desperate workers; it is domestic
legislation. Coming out of the protection of EU
employment law is not going to make it easier for
vulnerable employees to speak up for themselves. The
gig economy—the low-pay economy—is not going to
improve by our coming out of the European Union.
Indeed, I worry that it will get significantly worse. If
anybody thinks that the Conservatives want to come
out of EU employment legislation to improve workers’
rights, they really need to look back at the past 100 years
of employment law history on these islands.

As I said, it is unfortunate that Brexit has become an
all-consuming obsession for the Government, and now
for this Parliament, but it is inevitable, because if we get
it wrong, as the Government seem determined to do,
generation after generation will be paying the price
socially and economically. We discovered that we have
moved on from the previous Government policy—that
the EU can “go whistle” for any payment—to talking
about payment for part of the deal of about £37 billion,
which we will still be paying if and when I am 104 years
old. Possibly some right hon. and hon. Members here
will not be around to see that. That is how long it will
take simply to pay for a bad deal.

I have hardly even mentioned the potential catastrophe
in Ireland. I am deeply concerned that Ministers still
seem quite taken with the “Smart Border 2.0” proposal
that was published a few weeks ago. “Smart Border 2.0”
explicitly says that it relies on automatic barriers,
infrastructure, surveillance cameras and staffed checkpoints
at the border of Northern Ireland and the Republic of
Ireland. If the Minister says nothing else in summing
up, I hope he will say clearly—and in such a way that
none of his Back Benchers can try again—that the
“Smart Border 2.0” proposals are so inconsistent with the
Government’s commitments and so incompatible with the
Northern Ireland peace process and the Good
Friday agreement that, although an interesting idea, they
will go no further, that the Government will take
them no further and certainly that the EU will take
them no further when it is listening to the Government
of the Republic of Ireland.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon.
Friend makes a good point about the practicalities of
the Northern Irish border. Does he agree that the
practicalities for the many people whose properties
straddle the border are not being addressed at all in this
argument?

Peter Grant: Absolutely. It was so long ago that
neither the Brexit Secretary nor the Foreign Secretary
can remember the last time they visited the Irish border.
That is a failing that both of them have to put right
quite soon. I did not understand just how important a
non-border was until I went there with the Brexit Committee
and we could not find the border between two sovereign
states. That is what borders should be these days. They
should not be easy to see on a map or physical barriers;
you should be physical routes for the exchange of
people and, as I mentioned, ideas.

To date, nobody has put forward a proposal that
allows the Government’s red lines of leaving the customs
union and single market to be compatible with the
other red line of honouring the spirit and the letter of the
Northern Ireland Good Friday agreement. That
irreconcilability cannot be allowed to continue. If the
Government cannot come up with their own very clear
and detailed proposals within the next few weeks to
reconcile those irreconcilable red lines, the red lines of
leaving the customs union and single market will have
to go, because the red line of continuing the peace
process in Ireland cannot be sacrificed in any circumstances.
I appeal to the Minister to give assurances that no
proposal involving staffed checkpoints on the Irish
border will be given any credibility or consideration in
these negotiations.

2.31 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): My business interests
are declared in the Register of Members’ Financial
Interests, but I do not plan to talk about them today.

Before the referendum, I made a speech in the House
saying that we had become a puppet Parliament. All
too often, regulations came from the EU that we could
do nothing about, because they acted directly. In many
other cases, even if we had been outvoted or were not
happy about a proposition, a directive instructed the
House to put through massive and complex legislation
whether it wished to or not. We had a situation in which
the Front Benchers of the main parties, alternating in
government as they tended to do, went along with this.
The convention was that the Opposition did not really
oppose, because they knew that Parliament was powerless
and that the decision had been made elsewhere, whether
the British people liked it or not. That even extended to
tax matters, such as a number of VAT issues, including
areas where we cannot change VAT as we would like,
and to corporation tax issues, which included occasions
when we thought that we had levied money on companies
fairly, but the EU decided otherwise and made us give it
back.

Many British people shared my concern, and that
was why we all went out together and voted in large
numbers to take back control. The British people wanted
to trust their British Parliament again. Of course they
will find times when they dislike the Government, individual
MPs and whole parties, but they can live with that,
because they can get rid of us. They know that come the
election, if we cease to please, they can throw one group out and put in place a group who will carry out their wishes. They said very clearly to our Parliament in that referendum, “Take back control; do your job.”

A recent example is that of Her Majesty’s Government presenting a very long and complex piece of legislation to completely transform our data protection legislation. Because it was based entirely on new EU proposals, it went through without any formal opposition. The Opposition obeyed the convention and did not vote against it or try very hard to criticise it. I am sure that if the proposal had been invented in Whitehall and promoted actively by UK Ministers, the Opposition would have done their job, found things to disagree with and made proposals for improvement. We will have this “puppet Parliament” effect all the time that we are under control from Brussels.

Jonathan Edwards: Given the scenario that the right hon. Gentleman is putting forward, is it not the truth that the Welsh and Scottish Parliaments will also be puppet Parliaments post Brexit?

Sir William Cash: Will my right hon. Friend also bear in mind the manner in which laws are made in Europe? They are made behind closed doors in the Council of Ministers with no proper record of who votes, how and why—we are outvoted more than any other country—and then those laws come here and are imposed upon us in this Parliament.

John Redwood: I quite agree.

We wish to take back control. We will be a very different and much better country when this Parliament can settle how much tax we levy, how we levy it, how we spend money, how we conduct ourselves and what kind of laws we have.

My main remarks for the Minister and his colleagues on the Treasury Bench, however, concern the conduct of the negotiations. Like the Minister, I wish the Government every success. I hope that they get a really good deal—I look forward to seeing where they get to—but the EU is trying to make the process as difficult as possible by insisting on conducting the negotiations in reverse order. It says first that we have to agree to pay a whole load of money that we do not owe. It then says that we have to agree to a long transition period that coincides with its further budget periods, so that it can carry on levying all that money, and that is before we get on to what really matters: the future relationship and the questions of whether there be a comprehensive free trade agreement, what it will cover, and if it will be better than just leaving under WTO terms.

In order to have a successful negotiating position, the Government have rightly sketched out a couple of important propositions. The first is that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. That is fundamental, and I urge Ministers to understand that they must not sign any withdrawal agreement unless and until there is a comprehensive agreement that is credible and that can be legally upstanding, because there is no point paying money for nothing. There would only be any point in giving the EU all that money if there was a comprehensive agreement that the Government and the country at large could be proud of, and which enough leave voters could agree with as well as remain voters.

The second thing that the Government have rightly said is that no deal is better than a bad deal. That, again, is fundamental to the negotiations. I have never made any bones about this, because I said before the referendum that no deal was quite a likely outcome, and a fine outcome. For me, no deal is a lot better than staying in the EU: it would give us complete control over our money, meaning we could start spending it on our priorities; it would give us complete control over our laws, meaning we could pass the laws and levy the taxes that we wanted; it would give us complete control over our borders, meaning we could have the migration policy of our choosing; and it would give us the complete right and freedom to negotiate a trade policy with the EU and anybody else. That would depend, of course, on the good will of the other side as well, but I would far rather be in that position than part of a customs union in which I had little influence and that was extremely restrictive against others. There is therefore an awful lot going for no deal.

The Minister and his colleagues must stick to the proposition that they will recommend a deal to the House only if it is manifestly better than no deal. They need to keep reminding the EU negotiators that no deal offers Britain most of what it wanted when it voted to take back control.

Anna Soubry: Will my right hon. Friend confirm whether he has seen the Government analysis—apparently it involves excellent modelling and is far better than anything they did in the run-up to the EU referendum—showing that if we were to crash out without a deal and rely on WTO tariffs, our projected increase in productivity and economic growth would be reduced by 7.7%? Is that what his remain-voting constituents—the majority—voted for?

John Redwood: No, of course it is not, but that is not true. I have written at great length about that elsewhere. Unfortunately, I do not have time to go into a detailed rebuttal of those proposals, but we know that the Treasury modelling got entirely the wrong answer for the first 18 months after the referendum. Its short-term forecast, which should be easier to make, was massively wrong and predicted a recession. I and a few others put our forecasting reputation on the line during the referendum by saying that there would be growth after any no vote, rather than what the Treasury forecast. We were right.

I assure my right hon. Friend that I have not voted for anything that will make us poorer. We will be growing well, as long as we follow the right domestic policies. It is complete nonsense to say that there will be that kind of hit. It implies that we lose over half our exports to the European Union, and it is not a proper reflection of what would happen to our trade adjustment were anything that big to happen. I want to concentrate on the customs union.
Vicky Ford: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

John Redwood: I am sure that my hon. Friend wants me to concentrate on the customs union, because she shares my wish that the Government will be well supported if the Opposition decide to have a third go at voting through a customs union or customs union membership.

I remind the House that we have twice had big votes in the Commons in which Members have voted by a very large majority against our staying in the or a customs union. One was on an amendment to the Queen’s Speech motion, and the other was on an amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. I hear that some Labour Members may have changed their minds and want to vote again. I am a democrat, and the Opposition have their own ways of doing what they want to do, but I urge them not to vote to stay in the customs union.

Above all, are Labour Members not at all worried about poverty in emerging markets? Do they not think it is wrong that we place huge tariffs on poor countries’ tropical produce—produce that we cannot grow for ourselves? Would it not be great, when we are outside the EU customs union, to be able to take down those tariffs and give those countries more hope of promoting themselves by good trade, while at the same time benefiting our customers because they would be able to buy cheaper tropical products? Can we not do good trade deals with those emerging market countries across the piece? The tariff barriers are too high, and we could make mutually advantageous changes if we were free to do so. I urge the Labour party to remember its roots in campaigning against poverty and to join me in saying that the best way to get the world out of poverty is to get down the high tariffs on emerging market countries that the EU imposes, which I certainly do not agree with.

The Minister must remind Labour Members that no deal is better than a bad deal, and that no deal allows us to take back control of all the things that he and I promised to take back control of. He must also remember that we do not owe the EU any money. It would be fatally wrong to pay it loads of money if everything else does not work in the way we want.

Vicky Ford: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he agrees with the Prime Minister that we should look for a deal that covers many sectors that are not covered by the WTO, such as aviation, data exchange and having a mutual recognition of financial services, so that trade in those areas can easily continue?

John Redwood: I am afraid that I am out of time, so I cannot go into detail on all these matters. I believe that we should negotiate strongly and positively. I wish my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister every success, but we should negotiate strongly and positively. I believe that the country, the message is, “Get on with it.” If that means leaving with no deal, that is absolutely fine, and the UK crashes out of our long-standing alliance with our friends and nearest and greatest trading partners and we end up with, as the Treasury forecasts, a hit of 8% to our GDP by 2033.

John Redwood indicated dissent.

Mr Leslie: The right hon. Gentleman shakes his head. Those on the Front Benches will be noting that figures from Her Majesty’s Treasury have been disputed by their own Back Benchers.

It is important that we talk about European affairs. The right hon. Member for Wokingham advocated taking back control as though he on his own, isolated from all around him, can thrive and prosper without relationships and links with the outside world. It is tempting to envisage him locked in this room on his own, with the doors closed, just to see how he would thrive without the sort of relationships and sustenance that others provide.

So too, for the British economy, there is this fallacy about our independent sovereignty—that as a small island, we can cope on our own, without the rest of the world. These days, in the 21st century and in a modern economy, we rely on the rest of the world, and they also benefit from our engagement with them. We risk serious self-harm if we try to pretend that detaching ourselves from those alliances and relationships and going for the very first time towards less market access, as the Prime Minister advocates, is somehow going to make us better off. It will not; it will make us poorer.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) is talking about a world that is long gone, in actual fact. We are a big wide world. I remember when the right hon. Gentleman was a Minister; his judgment was faulty then, and it is as faulty now. He goes on about taking powers back from Europe. The last two days have proved that we are not getting our powers back from Europe under his terms. What is happening now is that the Government are trying to tell us what to do without votes.

Mr Leslie: We have to recognise that in so many areas of policy—not just economic or trade policy—we benefit from these alliances and relationships. They do need to be worked on, and we need to somehow give and take a little bit. That is the nature of the global neighbourhood in which we live.

It would be remiss if I did not at this point voice my appreciation for the statements from France and Germany, which have shown their solidarity and fraternity with the United Kingdom in respect of the Russian chemical attack in Salisbury. We are talking about European affairs, and it is important that Europe stands together at an important moment such as this.

But Brexit is bound to dominate this sort of debate, and there are a number of aspects that I want to pick up on. The first is the question of frictionless borders and the trade arrangements that we absolutely have to maintain, not just for our own economic continuance but because of the Good Friday agreement and the need to avoid anything that could diminish the peace settlement in Northern Ireland.
The phase 1 agreement that the Government signed up to said that if they cannot come up with alternative arrangements, full alignment will be the way forward. My understanding is that the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has this morning admitted that the notion of a technological option—the “smart borders” option—is just not viable. It is not going to work because it requires hard infrastructure at the borders. You will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that there are 275 crossing points on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The notion of having hard infrastructure—cameras, inspection posts and who knows what else—is clearly not compatible with the Good Friday agreement, so the Government have ruled that option out.

The only option that therefore exists is some sort of magical deal whereby the UK agrees to administer the external tariff arrangements for the rest of the European Union while simultaneously administering our own separate tariff arrangements for goods that are destined just within the UK. That does not happen anywhere else in the world. As well as being a complete bureaucratic nightmare, it would require reciprocity from our European partners in arrangements to our and theirs. They would have to administer a dual-tariff system for goods destined for the UK and those destined for Europe. It is just not going to happen. When the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) winds up the debate, he would do well to admit that the phase 1 agreement that he signed up to now means full regulatory alignment and, of course, that a customs union is the best and simplest way to achieve that.

The Government are trying their best and scrabbling around, asking the road haulage industry, trade bodies and other cargo and freight companies, “What are your volumes of traffic and what’s happening in trade?”, and making them sign non-disclosure agreements, to try to gag them if they dare to speak, even to their own trade body members, about their conversations with Ministers. That just shows how desperate the situation is.

Peter Grant: Has the hon. Gentleman considered the possibility that the reason the Government want non-disclosure agreements in every discussion is that the possibility that the reason the Government want non-disclosure agreements in every discussion is that the Government want to gag them if they dare to speak, even to their own trade body members, about their conversations with Ministers. That just shows how desperate the situation is.

Mr Leslie: It is very tempting to table a series of motions to keep extracting documents from the Government. For all the bluster of the Chancellor’s speeches and I say to him and my other Front-Bench colleagues that, having got the Labour party to support a customs union, the logic of all their arguments points to supporting retaining our participation in the single market, to avoid that austerity in years to come.

I want to finish on the arguments relating to the single market. We need to remember that the UK is an 80% service sector economy. While being in the customs union is good for the 20% of the economy that is based on physical or manufactured goods, 80% of our economy is based on services. That is why the single market matters—because it applies particularly to trade in services. Many trades and services will not be tariffed, taxed or diminished—they may be banned altogether, particularly in the field of financial services, which the Financial Secretary mentioned in his opening remarks. Financial services alone represent 11% of our economy and contribute £66 billion in revenue to our Exchequer every single year. That £66 billion pays for the schools and hospitals in the constituencies of all hon. Members. But, again, the Government are scrabbling around and trying to find some sort of mutual agreement on financial services. Just getting it referenced in a flimsy, two-sided A4 document on the future trade relationship will definitely not suffice.

Sir William Cash: Will the hon. Gentleman explain why it is that we have an £82 billion deficit with the other 27 members of the European Union, according to the Office for National Statistics?

Mr Leslie: In some areas we buy more of their goods than we sell, and in others we sell more goods than we buy. We have a significant surplus in financial services. We do financial services particularly well in this country. The Investment Association is exceptionally worried about the lack of co-operation agreements, which is a particularly technical term. We currently have such agreements by virtue of our membership of the European Union, but they will lapse on exit day. To what extent are the British Government seeking new or rolled-over co-operation agreements with each of the other 27 member states—perhaps the Under-Secretary of State can get advice on this from his officials by the time he winds up—so that the activities of some financial services are even legal in those countries?

The single market is also about goods, because some goods contain services aspects. Medical products require certification in order to be sold around the European Union. On the automotive sector, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has referred to the dangers of non-tariff barriers: regulatory alignment or divergence could be thrown into chaos if we leave the single market. I think about the single market benefits that consumers in the UK gain because they have safe products, a right of redress and enforcement on consumer goods. That is why the single market matters, and there are other issues besides.

Robert Neill: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point. An obvious example are goods that are sold with an insurance policy attached, which is a classic case of an area in which we are world beaters. Once we start to disentangle one part of the financial ecosystem, then we of course damage the whole lot, whether in trade with the EU or elsewhere.

Mr Leslie: The hon. Gentleman gives a perfect illustration. Let me imagine a driver, with insurance cover, departing from Belfast and crossing the border. At present, doing so does not require any particular change by the time he or she arrives in Dublin. After exit day, however, the applicability of the insurance
product might be null and void, and it will certainly require adaptation. This is not just about physical goods or the transfer of manufactured products, because some of these invisible products matter massively as well. If there was a car accident during that journey from Belfast to Dublin, where does the liability rest and who will enforce it? All such questions have been left entirely unanswered as the Government barrel headlong towards March 2019.

Of all the things that a single market would affect, the Good Friday agreement is the one I feel most strongly about, because I cannot see a solution to that particular problem that does not require the UK staying in and participating in the single market and the customs union. I say to all Members, including my Front Benchers and especially Conservative Members, that we cannot just assume that a customs arrangement for hard goods crossing borders will be adequate to maintain the principles maintained in the Good Friday agreement.

The red lines chosen by the Prime Minister were hers; they were not on the ballot paper in the referendum. Indeed, Daniel Hannan MEP and others have said that nobody even questioned the single market during the referendum campaign. It is now for Parliament to say politely to the Prime Minister that those red lines are not correct. If the Government have the courage to take forward the trade Bill and the Customs Bill, and certainly when the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill comes back from the House of Lords, they will have to confront the fact that there is a majority in Parliament for a customs union and, I believe, for a single market. Let us get on with it, and sort this problem out.

2.57 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie). On this, we are absolutely as one. It has been a consistent feature not only of the debate in the run-up to the referendum, but in everything that has followed, that there has been so much agreement between those of us on these Government Back Benches and those on the Opposition Back Benches. If I may say so, Opposition Front Benchers are also increasingly recognising the strength of the argument that Opposition Back Benchers and some Government Back Benchers have been making. We also have the agreement of SNP and Plaid Cymru Members; that is about it, unfortunately.

The point is very clear: this issue—the biggest issue that our nation has had to wrestle with in 40 years, and certainly since the second world war—has, on the one hand, divided our country and that division continues, but, on the other hand, has also brought together people from different political parties. We have put aside our party differences, because on this we are as one, and we have put our country first. I pay tribute to all the Members who have spoken out—often in the face of death threats, appalling emails and criticisms, and indeed unpleasantness even from within our own political parties—as doing so has not always been easy. However, it is very important that we do so because this is about our country and of course our constituents—it is not about us—and it is even more about our children and our grandchildren. As hon. Members have said, it is about making sure we get this right because the consequences will affect generations to come.

My view is that people in this country are undoubtedly getting utterly fed up with Brexit. I was going to say that they do not understand it, and that is not a criticism, but when we sit here talking about the fine details of “a” or “the” customs union “arrangement” or “agreement”, and when we delve into the detail of WTO tariffs on bananas, cars or beer—goodness me—people do not want to be involved. That is not because they do not care about our country—of course they care, desperately—but they elect us to this place so that we get on with that sort of stuff, and so that we put the country first and do the best thing for our constituents. They should not have, in effect, to micromanage the politics and detail of all the economic consequences and things that flow from that; they trust us to do it, but when they look at this place, I do not think they are particularly impressed by what they see.

In reality, the two major parties are almost together, although thankfully a difference is now emerging, which I will deal with in a moment. The Opposition have the good sense to come out in favour of a/the customs union—it does not matter what we call it; we now know that it delivers exactly the same arrangement that we currently have. [Interruption.] Sorry, “a” customs union, and I am not interested in the words. All I am interested in is what it delivers, and that is the only difference between the Labour party and the Front Bench of the Government who I obviously support. There is very little between them. Yet, as I have said before in this place, if we were to have a free vote, I have no doubt that the majority of Members would vote in favour of a/the customs union—we all know what we mean because we know what it would deliver, which is the continuation of peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland and the avoidance of a hard border. It would also convey many other benefits.

I also have no doubt that Members would vote in favour of us retaining our membership of the single market by being a member of EFTA, and I do not think that the people of this country are particularly impressed by the fact that that is not happening. They voted for us to speak up on behalf of them and their interests, and we should not be held back by three-line Whips and by an attitude that still exists in our society—led mainly by certain sections of the media—that anyone who has the temerity to speak out about or against the decision that was made in the EU referendum is in some way a “traitor” or a “mutineer”. It is an outrage! We come here to speak freely on behalf of our constituents.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): Is not a referendum the biggest free vote? Everybody participated; nobody was whipped. There were weeks and weeks of argument, and a decision was made.

Anna Soubry: That is a really interesting point. Of course we had a referendum, but can we just get real about this? First, 52% of those who voted did so for us to leave the European Union, but not one of them to my knowledge—certainly in my constituency—voted to be poorer. Of course, 48% of people voted for us to remain in the European Union, and they have a right to a say in what now happens. Too many people, including perhaps on the Government Benches, do not understand that a considerable portion of that 48% have accepted the vote, but now feel utterly excluded, sidelined and pushed to one side as we move forward to deliver the result in the interests of everybody in our country.
Peter Grant: The right hon. Lady is making, as always, an impassioned and well-informed speech. The ballot paper contained a question about membership of the European Union, but there has never been a referendum on membership of the customs union or the single market. Nobody knows for certain what people want regarding those institutions.

Anna Soubry: I completely agree; the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I take grave exception to the idea that across the length and breadth of this country people were sitting in pubs, cafés, bars or whatever discussing the finer points of the merits or otherwise of the customs union and the single market. The truth is that there are Members of this House who do not know what the customs union is, and there are Members of this House who do not understand what the single market is.

I am not going to name people, but I have had very good conversations with right hon. and hon. Friends about EFTA. I have explained, for example, that members of EFTA can retain their own fisheries and agriculture policies. There are colleagues who have said to me, “Good heavens, I didn’t know that. How very interesting. Can you tell me now about immigration?” So then I explain about articles 112 and 113, and so on and so forth, and about the brakes that could be put on immigration. These conversations have occurred only in the past three or four months, 18 months after the referendum and nearly a year after we triggered article 50. That is why I will say it again: when history records what happened in the run-up to and after the referendum, it will not be in any form of glowing testimony. On the contrary, I think we will all be painted very badly, apart from those right hon. and hon. Members who at least stood up and spoke out. If I dare say it, I think we have been increasingly proved right.

I think people are fed up. They want us to get on with it. They do not quite know what “it” is. Some people actually think we have already left the European Union. But they know that it is getting very difficult and very complicated. I believe that people are becoming increasingly worried and uneasy. It is the dawning of Brexit reality. They know that the deal, which they were told would take, if not for ever, then a very long time. When I say “for ever”, I mean that, if the Government continue to stick to their timetable, it will not be concluded until way after we have left the European Union. We will get very loose heads of agreement by way of a political statement attached to the withdrawal agreement, which this place will vote on sometime this October or November. People are beginning to realise that they have been sold a bit of a pup.

Only last week, I spoke to a constituent who voted leave who told me, in no uncertain terms—she was quite angry about it—that she had no idea about the implications for the Irish border of not getting this right. People of a particular generation really get it and understand this. Frankly, we are old enough to remember the troubles in all their ghastliness. We also remember the border. Some of us are old enough to remember customs border checks, when we had to go through a particular channel. We remember being terrified that the cigarettes or a bottle of whatever—I certainly would never have done any of these things, of course—might suddenly be uncovered by a customs officer, but that means absolutely nothing to huge swathes of our country. Older people, however, remember the troubles and they know how important it is that the border does not return. They understand how critical not having a border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has been to the peace process. They are now not just worried about the return of the border, they are quite cross about it. They are getting cross not just because they do not want it, but because they feel that none of this was discussed and explained before the referendum.

As I have said, we are now having the debate that we should have had before the EU referendum. I am looking towards those on the Scottish National party Benches. The debate held in Scotland in the run-up to the independence referendum was a long, long proper debate. If I may say so as an outsider, every single issue pertinent to the debate was properly teased out and discussed. I do not think anybody could have complained that they did not know the consequences.

Jonathan Edwards: The right hon. Lady is making an excellent point. In Scotland, the Scottish Government produced a White Paper—650 pages long—outlining completely what they were proposing. During the European referendum, the leave campaign produced a poster on a bus. That is why we are in the mess we are in now.

Anna Soubry: I might not quite go that far, but the hon. Gentleman makes a really important point. I was a member of the Government that decided we would have a referendum. To be very blunt, I am now quite ashamed of the fact that I made a decision that we should have a referendum without the proper debate that we clearly should have had and without the long run-up. More than that, this is the conclusion that I think the British people have also reached: how on earth did a responsible Government put in front of us, the people of this country—notwithstanding how brilliant we are—an alternative that we now see will cause our country so much harm? During the referendum campaign, when “Project Fear” was at its full height—the campaign was very poor on both sides, but “Project Fear” in particular with its madness and nonsense—I think that subconsciously, people thought to themselves, “No responsible Government would put something to us as an alternative to their preferred option that would deliver all this stuff, when actually, it will harm our economy, and even undermine or threaten our security and the future of peace in Northern Ireland. They wouldn’t do that.” Of course, now we know that is exactly what that option was, but we have moved on, as I must too.

Alison Thewliss: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Anna Soubry: I will make one last point—no, I will take the intervention, because it is probably more relevant to what I just said.

Alison Thewliss: I thank the right hon. Lady for the speech that she is giving, because it is another good one. The point has been made about the very short period running up to the referendum, when people had to make a very big decision on the basis of very scant information. Does she agree that it was far too short to counteract the decades of misinformation, and that we have a real responsibility as politicians to get more
information and more facts out to constituents, so that they can understand the basis on which they are going to make decisions?

**Anna Soubry:** The hon. Lady makes a very good point. Look, some people would argue that it is a miracle that 48% voted for the EU. Anybody who plays or watches cricket knows that before a game, they roll the pitch. We have taken a JCB digger to the pitch for the past 40 years. It is astonishing. On both sides, we have all blamed the EU for all our misfortunes: if something was difficult, we just blamed the EU. Then, of course, in a very short period, we said, “You know that thing that we said was really rather rubbish—actually, it is really rather wonderful. Would you go out and positively vote for it?”

The other dawning of the Brexit reality was in the excellent speech that the Prime Minister delivered a few weeks ago. In it, she faced up to the reality in a highly commendable way—her tone was right and I agreed with much of her content. However, the reality of what she said was this: in admitting that there would be, for example, no passporting for financial services and that we would have reduced access to the market, what she was saying—as others have observed—is that for the first time, I think, in the history of any Government in any country in the world, we are actively going to pursue a course, knowing that it will make us less prosperous than we are under the current arrangements. That is the view of Her Majesty’s Government. I hope as we go forward that perhaps the Government, in that spirit of reality, will also understand that this can and must be stopped. We cannot pursue a course that will make the people of this country less prosperous.

We are meant to be talking about the economic side of our EU relations and affairs, so I will make this observation. The OBR’s predictions were to be welcomed because they were better than its previous predictions about our prospects of growth. I observe, as many others have, that we benefit at the moment from a strong labour market. We are almost at the point of having record levels of employment, which means, of course, that we have more money in the coffers by way of taxation and national insurance. In the financial and insurance sectors, we have seen pay rises of some 7%, and as many have observed, services comprise 80% of our economy.

We know that consumer spending has risen, and that, too, would account for the increased money in the coffers, because it means that our VAT receipts have gone up again. The weakness of sterling means that the companies whose foreign earnings are important to them have seen the worth of those earnings go up.

We must take all those factors into account to understand why it is the view of many that, notwithstanding the OBR’s better forecast, our country is actually experiencing some of the slowest growth in the G20. We think we are doing well, but when we compare ourselves to other G20 countries, we see that we are not doing anywhere near as well as we should be. I have given an explanation of why we are not where we thought we might be, but the point, of course, is that if we were not leaving the European Union, we would be doing considerably better and our prospects would be considerably higher.

Let us be clear about this. Investments are already being delayed, and we know that unless we get this transition in place, a number of important businesses will leave our shores. We also know that business wants certainty, and, in my opinion, the certainty that it is crying out for is the certainty of knowing that we will stay in both the customs union and the single market. No one should underestimate the real risks that our country faces. If we do not get this right, businesses will simply leave. We have already seen examples of that. There are Japanese companies that were promised by Margaret Thatcher, one of the finest proponents of the single market, that our country would never leave the single market. They have invested billions of pounds in real, skilled jobs in our country. Anyone who speaks to those companies—as many of us do—should ask them how they see the prospect of our leaving the single market and the customs union, and, indeed, the European Union. The fact is that instead of investing here, they will invest in other European countries, because we were the bridgehead into the EU.

I have dealt with the Government’s analysis in my interventions, and I know that you are urging me to speed up, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I have not had an opportunity for some time to make a long speech about this matter, which is dear to my heart, so I hope you will forgive me. I hear you—or, rather I see you—and take the hint. I am about to make my concluding remarks. However, these things need to be said.

The Government, quite rightly and responsibly, asked civil servants in all Department to look at the different options that were available and to analyse the economic benefits that they might or might not convey. I urge Members to read the papers. They should go into the darkened room, or even better, get hold of those papers, because the Exiting the European Union Committee has had the good sense to publish them. This is new modelling—the best available framework, prepared by civil servants who act with complete independence and, as usual, have exercised the huge skills that they possess. They recognise all manner of variances. They believe that these analyses are the very best, and they are keen to sing the praises of the modelling.

What does that modelling reveal? It reveals that even if the House and the Government were sensible enough to accept the single market and the customs union, membership of the European economic area after we had left the EU would cause our projected growth to fall by 1.6%, a free trade arrangement would reduce it by 4.8%, and World Trade Organisation rules—the cliff edge urged by some Conservative Members; the most irresponsible of all options—would involve a reduction of 7.7%. Moreover, those models do not include the value of the customs union.

I want to conclude—you will be pleased to know, Madam Deputy Speaker—by expressing some views on trade deals. It concerns me greatly that the British public are not being properly and fully informed about them. I say with respect to those on the Treasury Bench that it is very important that they are absolutely up front with people and stop putting forward the chaper of what are effectively unicorn deals. We enjoy 50 free trade deals by virtue of our membership of the EU. The idea that we will not get a deal with Australia is madness, because of course the EU will soon be doing a deal with Australia, and who do we think they will be doing a
deal with first, the EU or the UK? The EU of course. So we will benefit from all these free trade deals in any event; we are not getting anything different by leaving the EU.

It is very unfortunate that we are not explaining the facts on free trade arrangements—the 50 or so we currently have by virtue of our membership of the EU, and the other arrangements we also enjoy by virtue of our membership. As this analysis shows, the reality is that even if we get every single free trade deal that is available, that still will not make good the loss to our economy of leaving the EU.

So—finally, Madam Deputy Speaker—people must wake up and realise that our EU colleagues will miss us and they want us to stay, and if we leave and a future generation wants us to return we will not be able to re-join on such good terms as we currently have. The EU will not miss us because of our trade—they will find new markets; we must get real on that—but they will miss us because of what our country has always brought to the EU: we are the voice of sanity; we are the check the EU will not miss us because of our trade—they will find new markets; we must get real on that—but they will miss us because of what our country has always brought to the EU: we are the voice of sanity; we are the check

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con) indicated dissent.

Anna Soubry: My hon. Friend shakes his head, but, with great respect, he should go and speak, as many of us have done, to ambassadors and senior members of Government. They are genuinely upset that our country is leaving, because of the loss from that and the damage and harm it will do to the EU and because of the great role our country has played in many respects in the best part of the EU’s work, which is the advancement of free trade.

I believe that the people of this country are looking for some way out of this mess, because it is a mess, and it is up to us as politicians to provide the leadership. This place cannot overturn the referendum result; the people began this and it is for the people to finish it. However, the people are now entitled to have their say on the final deal—I have no doubt about that—because their future is what is most important and increasingly, as the reality dawns and they understand the full detail of what we have done, it is not that they are regretting their vote, but they do not like what they see on offer as the future out of the EU. So let us be clear: let the people have a final say on the final deal.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I appreciate that, as the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said, she had a lot of points to cover. It is also obvious to me that nobody except the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) has taken the least notice of my exhortation to take about 10 minutes. If I were to impose a time limit now, it would be seven minutes, but I am still going to try to proceed without a time limit, and I hope that Members will tailor their remarks accordingly. I do not suffer if somebody makes a long speech—more than twice as long as the 10 minutes I recommended—but other colleagues do.

3.24 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): So here we are again. Another day, another debate on Europe—nearly two years after the referendum and at a time when we face enormous challenges both here and abroad. The inescapable truth about Brexit is that our Government are involved in the biggest exercise of reinventing the wheel that this country has ever seen. When a nerve agent has been used in Salisbury to try to kill a former spy, and when we are expelling the largest number of Russian state personnel from our soil for 30 years, I am sure that I am not the only one who regrets that our first foreign policy objective is our departure from the European Union, but we are where we are. Rather than endlessly raking over the referendum, or making the case as to why the public should have a final say on the deal, we need to focus on finding a way through this that limits the damage to our economy, maintains peace in Northern Ireland, protects opportunities for the next generation, and leaves our alliance with the rest of Europe as strong as possible.

We need to start, though, by being honest. If we go out on to the doorstep, we will struggle to find someone who would vote differently in a referendum today from how they voted two years ago. Yes, there might be an increased willingness to listen to a different point of view and, yes, there is an overwhelming sense that the Prime Minister is making a dog’s breakfast of the negotiations, but for all the talk of bringing people together, our country is still divided.

I do not want to live in a country that is dominated by divisions over Brexit for a decade. I do not want to sit in a Parliament that fails to get to grips with the real problems facing this country—housing; how we care for the elderly; how we upskill our population—simply because we are pursuing fantasy trade deals elsewhere. I do not want to listen to any more interminable speeches from Ministers that leave us none the wiser as to what their policy is and which do nothing to clear the fog that exists in Brussels or in the public consciousness here. We have to make this easier for ourselves. We need to cut the complexity, and that means staying in the single market by staying in the European economic area and staying part of a European customs union. The sooner the Government wake up to that fact, the sooner we might make some proper progress.

The Prime Minister bleats on about her deep and special relationship and about her desire for a bespoke deal but, as the clock ticks on, there is no sign of that. Last year, she admitted that she needed more time to sort out future trading arrangements. She calls it an implementation period and Brussels calls it a transition period, but I call it cutting yourself more slack to work out what on earth to do. There is no guarantee that we will get a transition period, but assuming that we do, and assuming Parliament votes for it as part of a skeleton withdrawal agreement—that is a big if—we will be legally out of the EU next year. Our trading arrangements will stay the same until the end of 2020, but what then?

At the moment, this is like reading a seven-year-old’s letter to Father Christmas. We see an unrealistic wish list combined with tantrum-like demands. The Prime Minister wants a customs partnership, but not a customs union. She wants no tariffs on goods traded between the UK and the EU, but does not want to sign up to the common set of standardised tariffs that apply to goods coming into the EU from outside. She does not want a border in Northern Ireland to check where goods have come from and nor does she want one down the Irish Sea. She wants a special tracking system for goods
coming into the UK that would then be onward bound for Europe. She talks about technology and authorised economic operators, but the customs experts and freight handlers remain unconvinced.

On the standards that goods would need to meet in order to be sold to the EU, the Prime Minister wants us to sign up to the rules in some areas, but not all, and she wants to reserve the right to change the arrangements in future. She wants to be in some of the regulatory agencies that supervise and enforce the rules, but only if a UK court rules on related matters. Even then, she is not sure whether she wants to be part of just the European Medicines Agency, the European Chemicals Agency and the European Aviation Safety Agency, or if she wants to be part of others, too. She does not have an answer on services, the area in which we enjoy a trade surplus with the EU, but rather talks about creativity and ambition in finding solutions. There is no trade deal anywhere in the world that gets close to guaranteeing the access we have to Europe for our services industry. Our major export to the EU is financial services; Canada’s is pearls and semi-precious metals. The idea that we base our future trading arrangements on a Canadian-style free trade agreement while ruling out being part of the EEA is absolute madness.

I am a London Labour MP, and I sometimes baulk at the obscene wealth that I see on display in our city. However, I also know that the wealthy bankers, lawyers and hedge fund managers not only have money, but spend it. For every one of them, there are probably four or five jobs in events management, hospitality, retail and security, and those jobs are done by my constituents. I cannot bear the thought of our great city losing out to Paris, Frankfurt or New York, but mark my words: we need people to come and spend it. For every one of them, there are probably four or five jobs in events management, hospitality, retail and security, and those jobs are done by my constituents. I cannot bear the thought of our great city losing out to Paris, Frankfurt or New York, but mark my words: we need people to come and spend it. For every one of them, there are probably four or five jobs in events management, hospitality, retail and security, and those jobs are done by my constituents.

I do not think that anyone really appreciates the extent to which our country depends on EU labour. It speaks volumes that two years after the referendum, the Government have no answer to what the post-Brexit immigration system will look like. Last week, I met the HR director of a major restaurant group. It has about 300 restaurants in the UK, and I discovered that 61% of its chefs are from the EU. When I walk from Lewisham to Catford, I see huge signs outside small domiciliary care agencies that are desperate for staff, and that is before we even talk about the recruitment and retention crisis in the NHS. I do not know how many times I have to say this, but we have an ageing population. We control immigration from countries that account for 90% of the world’s population. We need people to come here to work. Fewer EU migrants means fewer taxpayers and fewer people spending money in our shops.

I have reflected quite a lot recently on why I care so much about Europe. If I am honest, it is intensely personal. We seem to forget that freedom of movement works two ways. People can come here, but we can also go and live in other European countries. I grew up in a working-class family. My dad is an electrician and my mum is a dinner lady, and I was the first person in my family to go to university. I dreamed of travelling the world when I was young, but I knew that the bank of mum and dad was not an option. I lived for a year in Austria and worked as a holiday rep. I fell in love with the country and ended up married to someone who is half Austrian.

I genuinely feel that the ease with which I could go and live in another European country allowed me to live my dreams. It gave me opportunities, and I do not want the next generation to be denied those opportunities. Anyone listening to Nigel Farage would think that the EU was the preoccupation of the middle classes—it is not. I think that we need to stay in a customs union and in the single market to maintain a close relationship with Europe. We should be prepared to preserve the principle of freedom of movement within that, even if we administer the process slightly differently.

We have to dial down the rhetoric on all this because I worry about where it will all end. Just think of the newspaper front pages that we have seen in the last year. Where do the bellicose language, blame and brinkmanship get us? My grandfather and my husband’s grandfather fought on opposing sides in the second world war. Mine walked across Europe after he was liberated from a prisoner of war camp, and my husband’s absconded from Scandinavia and made his way home to Austria. The borders that criss-cross my family’s history should not go back up, and we should not take opportunities away from the next generation.

We should not fool ourselves into believing that there is a golden economic future without a close relationship with the EU, and the Government need to be honest about that. They need to be honest about the fact that the political choices they have made in the past two years are not automatic consequences of the referendum. They need to rub out their red lines and do the right thing for the economy, the next generation and our place in the world. I believe that that means remaining part of the single market and a customs union.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) did very well on her 10 minutes, but I give in—we need to have a formal time limit of eight minutes.

3.35 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I will endeavour to be as brief as I can, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), who made her points with great passion and eloquence. I find myself in an interesting position in this debate, because I was well known in my area as a remainer. I was shaking my head earlier because I believe we will still have a very close relationship with Europe. However, 70% of my constituents voted leave, and this was of course 10 months before 62% of them voted for me—Members may extrapolate from that what they will. Perhaps it was because I was a remainer and a Eurosceptic—you can be both.
The aforementioned interesting position in which I find myself is that, although I am a remain, I am, above all, a democrat. Therefore, I am now determined to follow through on Brexit; we were given a very clear message, not only by my constituents, but by the UK as a whole. It was always going to be a rocky path and, as we have seen, it has been beset by those who might want to make the UK take another path or even, as has been said, hold a second referendum. That would be a serious mistake and take us back to the dark days of destructive populism, and I am sure none of us wants to poke that particular hornet’s nest again.

As we all know, referendums are, by their very nature, divisive. Let us take the example of the referendum in Scotland, a wonderful country where I have had the great pleasure of working on many occasions and in many places. There was always that united joshing at the token Sassenach—that was me, and it was a position I enjoyed very much. It was a part I had to play. Interestingly, shortly after that referendum, I returned to Scotland, where I was working in Glasgow, and found that the Scots were now at each other’s throats in Sauchiehall Street and the token Sassenach was largely ignored. We have now had our EU referendum and the results have had very similar effects, so I reiterate that we do not want a second, even more divisive, referendum.

The only sensible way forward is to ensure a clean break with Europe, while ensuring that we get the best deal possible—a unique deal, as the Minister said. I refer to a bespoke deal that suits the very special relationship that we already have with our European neighbours. Leaving the EU cannot mean long-term membership of the EU’s single market or the customs union. That would mean complying with the EU’s rules and regulations, with the UK having very little or no say over them at all. By remaining a member of the single market and customs union, the UK would, in effect, not be leaving the EU at all. It would mean less control for the UK, not more, and that is not what my constituents or the UK as a whole voted for.

My constituents voted to step out on to the world stage, taking the lead and taking advantage of new opportunities. I am pleased that we are building the economic base that will help our country compete in the world market. I am pleased to say that in withdrawing from the EU, the UK will be leaving the common fisheries policy, a policy that has had a profound impact both on the UK’s coastal communities and on the sustainability of our fish stocks. As an MP for a coastal community—the wonderful, glorious sunshine coast of Clacton, Walton and Frinton—I believe it is imperative that the Government do not give ground to the EU on this issue, especially now that Donald Tusk has requested that reciprocal access to our fishing waters be maintained.

I am also delighted that, according to press reports today, EU negotiators have accepted our demands to pursue an independent trade policy while remaining inside the customs union and single market, but only during the transitory or, as the Minister said, implementation period. Then, we come out of the single market and customs union, and, as we have done so many times before, strike out on our own to a bright new future. That bright new future can be achieved only if we give our negotiators a free hand to do the deal.

Those who have challenged the deal makers to declare their hand in Parliament before any deal is struck demonstrate a fundamental ignorance of the whole process of negotiations. The 27 countries of Europe must not be given the luxury of knowing exactly where our bottom line is. That would clearly negate any negotiation. I say to Opposition Members that it is really a case of “Don’t tell ’em, Pike!”

We made a mistake when just before Christmas we narrowly voted for Parliament to have final approval of any deal. That weakened our negotiators’ hand. The EU is now aware that, whatever deal is struck, it might not be approved; thus, it might feel that it can strike a harder bargain. Furthermore, if I may be allowed a small analogy, if I come to buy your car, Madam Deputy Speaker, whatever odd sticker you might have in the windscreen, we both want something: I want your car and you want my cash. At the outset, we must both be prepared to walk away. That is the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) made, and that, as we all know, is how business works. To sum up with another analogy, one does not play poker and show one’s hand.

I, too, have lived and worked in Vienna in Austria, which is a lovely place; I had a long-term contract to work in Rome—it was five years, I think; and like many of us, I have holidayed all over Europe. Members would imagine that those experiences would make me a classic Europhile, and they did. But I reflected on the fact that I have also worked in America, Egypt, the far east, the Arabian states and Africa. So what does that make me now? A globophile? I think it does. The opportunities to live, work, trade and play all over the world will still be with us but, because we are leaving the EU, we will have control of our own borders. Perhaps more importantly, we will still be able to attract people from all over the world to be a part of the great British economy.

Finally, I declare myself to be wearing two hats in this debate: one as an optimist and the other as an animal lover. I have been an animal lover all my life. I own a house full of yappy dogs and in the 1990s I was part of a team that broke up a puppy-farming ring in Wales. I now see an optimistic future in which we can dramatically strengthen our animal rights laws when we are no longer constrained by the EU. The UK has higher animal welfare standards than any other country in Europe, and the Government have delivered a slew of animal welfare initiatives over the past months alone—for instance, an ivory ban to help end elephant poaching; CCTV in slaughterhouses; an increase in the maximum sentence for animal cruelty; a ban on electric-shock collars; a ban on microbeads; and the cutting down of single-use plastics that harm our fish, birds and sea mammals, just to name a few.

EU law should not be a benchmark for animal welfare. People can keep farm animals in unspeakably cruel conditions in Europe without breaking a single EU law. It would be depressing if that were the standard that we set for ourselves. I wish to focus on strengthening animal rights as we go through Brexit, and I see a good opportunity as we consider a ban on live animal exports in Europe, and the Government have delivered a slew of animal welfare initiatives over the past months alone—for instance, an ivory ban to help end elephant poaching; CCTV in slaughterhouses; an increase in the maximum sentence for animal cruelty; a ban on electric-shock collars; a ban on microbeads; and the cutting down of single-use plastics that harm our fish, birds and sea mammals, just to name a few.

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about how much this House knows that what we are working towards will be an absolute unmitigated disaster for our constituents. Every one of us in the House, apart from the tiny minority who are driving this disastrous move forward, is absolutely clear that we are going to leave our country and our constituents poorer. It will be a disaster.

I have to say to the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) that it is nonsense to say that when the facts change, one does not change one’s opinion. Were that true, there would be no divorce. It would mean saying to every woman in the House, “You would never be able to take back that dress that you thought was wonderful when you first saw it but that looked an absolute unmitigated disaster when you got it home.” The facts are changing and we are finally getting to the truth of the disaster of where we are going, so it is right that we go back to the people and say, “Do you want to change your mind? Is this the right direction?”

The impact on London will be tremendous, as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), but I cannot begin to talk about how disastrous it will be for Wales. May I start with the issue of gross value added? Gross value added is one of those terms that does not really resonate with constituents, but let us look at what it means in Wales. In 2016, it was £59.6 billion. The Government’s projections mean that Wales would lose about £5.7 billion in the event of no deal, and around £3.3 billion if we secure a trade agreement. That is over a period of about 15 years, but it will have a huge impact on the Welsh economy. It is not the most vibrant economy, but it will have a devastating impact.

I could throw lots of figures about, but one that impacts on families across my constituency is inflation. Inflation remains at 3%. Wages are not going up, but prices are, and my families are becoming worse off. The cost of food and other goods is soaring as a result of the fall in the value of the pound, which remains about 15% below pre-referendum levels. That is a visible and very real impact on the daily lives of my constituents.

I have talked to many of my constituents about how they voted. Some of them say, yes, they got a great result. They got the result that they wanted out of the referendum; they got rid of David Cameron—job done. That is what they have actually said to me. It was not about Europe; it was about austerity. They hated what was happening to their families. They hated the fact that so many of them were heading off to food banks. Some of them say, yes, it was about immigration, but really it was about the wages that they were getting and the 1% pay rise that, year on year, meant that they and their families were falling behind.

For many of them, it was about taking back control. They would say to me, “These unelected bureaucrats”, and I would say, “Well, okay, but tell me the name of the director of education in Bridgend County Borough Council.” They would say, “What? I don’t know, Mrs Moon.” Well, that is an unelected bureaucrat. It is not who the bureaucrats are that we need to know; it is who the politicians are. It is the politicians who hold those bureaucrats to account, and it is the politicians who make the decisions. It is about knowing who our politicians are and getting behind them that is the important part of democracy.

A grim time lies ahead. Most businesses constantly approach MPs to say that if we leave the customs union there will be severe consequences, which makes me really, really nervous. I have two major employers at two ends of my constituency: the Ford engine plant and Tata Steel. The impact on both the car industry and the steel industry will be devastating when we leave the European Union. I cannot begin to talk about the impact that job losses in those two industries will have on my constituents. I cannot begin to talk about the loss of future opportunities for the children in my constituency. I have fantastic schools and I am so proud of the bright, alert, really eager youngsters for whom we should, as a country, be promoting a future of opportunity, instead of which I hear fantasies about wonderful trade deals with countries that will never, ever bring the benefits—I ask Members to read the submission from Tata Steel—that access to the European markets currently brings to Tata Steel.

Anna Soubry: The hon. Lady is making a very important speech. I suggest that my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) visits her constituency, and talks to Ford and Tata Steel in order to understand the importance of frictionless supply chains, membership of the customs union and membership of the single market in the very real industrial world that the hon. Lady and her constituents inhabit.

Mrs Moon: I thank the right hon. Lady for saying that, because I have those conversations all the time.

When I trotted over to DExEU to read the wonderful insight reports that we were meant to see, I was absolutely appalled by the poor quality of analysis that would be devastating for the people I represent. I will not vote for anything in this House that I think will damage the people I represent. I feel awful guilt—the right hon. Member for Broxtowe also mentioned this—about having voted for that referendum without insisting that we had all these debates before we took it to the people. I recently attended one of my local Women’s Institutes, where a lady said to me, “We shouldn’t have been asked to vote, should we? I didn’t really know what I was voting for. I went with what everybody else was saying, but I didn’t really understand the consequences, and now I’m worried about my grandchildren.” We should all be worried about those grandchildren.

So here we are. It is really quite obvious that we are not going to have frictionless trade. If we leave the single market and the customs union, we are going to make sure that our families are worse off. Europe is on our doorstep. We can get from here into the centre of Europe in a matter of hours. The EU has 37 trade deals with more than 65 countries around the world, covering 15% to 17% of the UK’s trade in goods. The EU has trade deals in place with more countries than the US, which has 20; China, which has 23; and Australia, which has 19. And yet, what are we going to do? We are going to throw that away.
Finally, I am a Member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. Every time I attend a meeting, colleagues there tell me of their fear of the consequence of Britain’s departure for the stability of Europe. Every time I see them they ask me, “Is there any chance?” I just hope to God that we wake up in time and say, “Yes, there’s a chance.”

3.52 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I have a lot of sympathy with what has been said by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). I will put my case slightly differently and, perhaps, a little more succinctly.

I take the view that this country made an error. It was a democratic error, but it was an error. And because we are democrats, we have to live with the consequence of the error until such time as I hope may one day be the case, when the future generation reverses that error in some way. However, I am also a realist and know that that is not likely to happen any time soon. Therefore, we must ensure that we respect the outcome of the referendum—like it or not—but that we do so in a way that mitigates, to the greatest extent possible, the damage that will inevitably flow from it. The Prime Minister at her Mansion House speech was frank and honest, as I have always found her to be, about the fact that there is damage and that we must therefore mitigate the risk.

I do not do my politics in belief and faith; that is appropriate for the confessional, but not government and litigation. I do my politics in hard-headed reality, which is why I want to talk about services. Financial services underpin the economy of this country. We are a service economy or we are nothing. The position on services is worrying. My constituents are dependent on services, as 36% of them work in the financial and professional services sector—the 16th highest proportion in the country. Other hon. Members have already set out the massive contribution that the financial services make to our economy, beyond any other.

Anything that damages financial services damages the economy, the tax take, our public services, and the lives of every man and woman in this country. It directly damages the lives of my constituents. I will not support anything that materially damages the lives, the wellbeing and the services of my constituents. I want to help the Prime Minister to avoid that happening. To do that, I want to give her flexibility. As soon as she expresses her realism, seeks flexibility and recognises that there must be compromise, some of my hon. Friends promptly appear with another pot of red paint. They are the ones who make her life harder, not those of us who support her in the realism and honesty that she set out in her Mansion House speech.

Let us then look specifically at what needs to be done to achieve the result that we need for financial services. First, we have to find for the City of London, if possible—it is a big if, and whether it will be achieved I know not, but let us set it out very clearly—a means, where mechanisms exist, to enable maximum access for financial services firms and for the legal services firms that underpin them: the two go together. There has to be an early transitional arrangement, or implementation—what’s in a name?—to ensure day-one continuity.

Secondly, there has to be—I want to hear from Ministers how we take this forward and a reassurance that it is central to their view—mutual market access built on the existing position of regulatory convergence. Moving away from that would damage market access; it is not in this country’s interest. That should be based on a commitment—frankly, an ongoing commitment—to mutual recognition and regulatory co-operation, with a joint UK-EU mechanism to ensure that regulation and principles of supervision are monitored as they evolve over time.

There would have to be a dispute resolution mechanism. We can call it a court or a tribunal—I do not much mind. We ought to think about the costs of a plethora of arbitration tribunals, although perhaps remaining within EFTA, or the EEA, will give us a ready-made dispute reconciliation mechanism through the EFTA court. It might be unwise to rule that out.

Anna Soubry: Is my hon. Friend concerned about the cost of all the provisions that will have to be made to govern all these various sectors and to manage all these new arrangements? Would he like the Government to produce, before any final meaningful vote in this place, the actual costs of delivering the Brexit deal?

Robert Neill: My right hon. Friend makes an entirely fair point. We should do that, because there is going to be an administrative cost that will ultimately be borne by consumers and taxpayers.

The industry itself has done analysis of the costs in some areas of financial services. For example, the wholesale banking industry estimates that if there is regulatory fragmentation, it is likely that $30 billion to $40 billion of extra capital will need to be raised. The London Stock Exchange Group calculates that changing the location of clearing houses—we must try to retain euro clearing, which is critical for the sector—will have a potential cost of some $25 billion, not just to us but to the EU27. It is in our mutual interest, on both sides, to get an agreement. No analysis of costs has been done: we should be honest about that and do so. We have to get these agreements.

We must ensure, too, that there is the ability to hire talent across the board and to move it seamlessly. It has to be possible that people can move staff from an office in Brussels, Paris or Frankfurt to London without any hold-up or delay—not even the need for the slightest bit of paperwork. That has to be achieved sensibly. Again, it is in our interest because otherwise we damage the ecosystem of the global financial hub that London is. As the Chancellor rightly acknowledged in his speech last week, the depth of the London capital markets frees not only businesses but sovereign debt for the EU27 nations. Too much rigidity from either side makes that difficult and puts it at risk.

The other thing that underpins this is the legal structure that goes with the professional services. Our legal services are second to none. We are the venue of choice for commercial litigation and dispute arbitration. That itself is a great gainer of income for this country. The legal services sector was worth £26 billion to the economy in 2015–16—1.5% of GDP—and is responsible for about £4 billion of exports, about 55% of which goes to the EU.
Fly-in fly-out arrangements are critical to that. We need an arrangement whereby, post the establishment directive, lawyers can have their qualifications mutually recognised in the EU27 states, can move seamlessly from one office to another, have the professional standing to advise their clients in EU27 countries and—this is very important but not often mentioned—have their client legal privilege recognised and protected, which can happen only where a lawyer’s qualification is recognised. Without a deal on that, British lawyers will not be able to advise clients or firms in EU27 countries—because professional privilege will not apply—appear in their courts or have the right to arrive in those countries and be present for negotiations with clients in important commercial contracts. It is critical, therefore, that we do not forget the need to get the legal services sector absolutely squared off in our future arrangements.

We must ensure the recognition and enforcement of judgments. A derivative contract—something we lead the world in—is worth while only so long as it can be enforced. We must ensure that they and all other commercial contracts have certainty of enforcement, not only over the transition period, but going forward, as they are typically written for three to five years. At the moment, we do that with one simple EU directive. It would be most unfortunate if we had to replicate that with each country plus those with which the EU has reciprocal arrangements. We can mitigate that by immediate action to join the Hague convention, but that is a back-up, not an ideal situation; we have to go further. I ask the Minister to detail what meetings he and his departmental officials have had with the Bar Council, the Law Society and, where appropriate, the senior judiciary to discuss the practical steps we need to take to safeguard the position of Britain’s legal services sector going forward and how it underpins the broader financial and professional services sector.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Because there have been quite a lot of interventions, I now have to reduce the time limit to six minutes. I am sorry. Hon. Members should bear it in mind, however, that even that will be tight.

4.2 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Brexit—what a success it’s been, eh? The restoration of greatness is upon this sceptred isle. Except, it’s not. When we finally got some sight of what the Government thought might be the economic impact of Brexit, it was horrific. It was even more horrific given that the Government had exhibited some worrying signs of being massively optimistic about Brexit, when more sober heads could not see much reason to be optimistic at all.

Geographical analysis suggests that we are getting the rather unpleasant end of a sharp stick and sectoral analysis suggests that the stick is sharper than it should be. The Financial Times, as we have heard, estimated the cost as being about the same as the side of a red bus. We should not take a journalist’s word for it, though; the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) spoke of the OBR’s improved forecasts, but we should recognise that its growth forecasts for this year, next year and the year after are about a third down on the forecasts made in March 2016 for the same years.

The Scottish Affairs Committee has been taking evidence on the impact of Brexit on the immigration Scotland needs, so I will confine most of my remarks to that. There simply is not any organisation coming to the Committee and saying it thinks it is a good idea that we are leaving the EU or that there are fabulous opportunities waiting for us just around the corner. We are hearing from no one who thinks that our economy is going to be bolstered by losing access to the customs union and the single market and definitely no one who thinks that cutting immigration is a good thing.

CBI Scotland says that the Brexit referendum was the stepping-off point for its members putting the prospect of new immigration rules and the uncertainty that has surrounded the status of EU workers at the top of their concerns. The CBI also said that EU nationals make a vital contribution to the Scottish economy.

The same argument was made by the National Farmers Union of Scotland, which pointed to the thousands of agricultural workers from the rest of the EU who keep Scotland’s farms working. I assume that there are many similar stories to be told elsewhere. Jonnie Hall of the NFUS pointed out that our veterinary services in Scotland depend greatly on people who are trained in other EU countries, and that our haulage industry depends on drivers from elsewhere in Europe. Associated industries all rely on EU citizens coming here and working to make sure that our agricultural products get to market.

Skilled jobs need to be done, and we do not have enough skilled people in the UK to do them. It is not a case of employers importing cheap labour to undercut workers here, as the leader of the Labour party suggested in Dundee last week. It is a case of there not being the workers here to do the jobs that need doing. We have already heard stories of crops rotting in the fields because there were not the workers to pick them, as a result of EU citizens not coming to work the fields, and that is before the restrictions bite.

As Jonnie Hall pointed out, the damage is being done before the promised sunny uplands come into view. He said:

“We have experience of our members who have very, very high-value crops in the field that have simply rotted over the winter because there has not been the labour to pick the vegetables. We are always being told by Mr Gove that we will be driving an agricultural industry that is based on new technology. We are yet to discover the technology that can recognise and pick the right crop at the right time as effectively as a human being can.”

The food and drink industries are major players in Scotland’s economy, and this is the agriculture sector telling us that we need immigration to be easy to administer and freely available. Losing the freedom of movement of EU citizens is a disaster for agriculture, and farmers need a replacement quickly.

The NFUS has come up with a solution that might assist. Mr Hall told us that the NFUS has had conversations with the Scottish Government, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and other departments, but at the Scottish Home Office—the one door it really needs to open. That needs to be fixed, and I hope the Minister can at least give some assurance of assistance.
Our food prices are already being adversely affected by the weakness of the pound and increasing import costs. Families the length and breadth of these islands cannot afford price increases caused by scarcities because farmers cannot get their crops in from the fields. Our agricultural economy needs to be protected and nurtured, and that needs freedom of movement. I am reminded of a speech given by the then Environment Secretary, the current Leader of the House, in a speech in Paris in October 2016, when she said that we would address the economic chaos of Brexit by selling food around the world. Unless she meant that we would offer countries a pick-your-own deal, I am not sure we can sell food that stays in the fields.

The same story is coming through from other sectors. Academia, scientific research and financial services all rely heavily on EU citizens as well as the EU marketplace to make the economy work. Without freedom of movement, we have economic meltdown. Taking back control appears to be the equivalent of being a child sitting in the back of the car with a toy steering wheel—you have the impression of power, but it is just a plastic wheel spinning round and round.

There has been far too much overconfidence from the Government and not nearly enough hard work and proper dedication to the task. Brexit is a disaster, and will continue to be the most costly and damaging political decision any Government have made in modern times unless we stop it. Let us end it. For pity’s sake and for the sake of the people we represent, let us find a proper accommodation in the EU.

4.8 pm
Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): In my brief remarks, I will consider the security situation with regard to European affairs and the impact that it can and should have on our defence spending.

My approach to Russia, which is the most urgent security challenge when it comes to European affairs, would be one of peace through strength. We must consider that attitude at a time when our own military strength has been significantly reduced following the fiscal challenges of 2010 onwards. Concurrently, we have had the rise of a resurgent Russia, with 1 million men under arms, that invaded Georgia in 2008, has invaded Ukraine and Crimea and has recently prosecuted this outrageous attack in Salisbury. We need to be very clear-eyed about that and realise that we need to regain this ground if we are to have a credible deterrent.

The strategic defence and security review 2015 laid out a very good plan for regaining that ground, but the bottom line is that if we want a strong, capable military, we have to pay for it. We need to urgently address the £2 billion black hole in the SDSR 2015 plan. The Treasury is seized of the importance of that in terms both of national security and of our security posture in Europe.

The issue is also urgently important because we have an enhanced forward presence. We have 800 soldiers in Estonia. General Sir Richard Shirreff, the former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe, has said that investment in their capabilities is important because without it they will remain a political token and that “without proper command and control and the artillery, engineers, attack helicopters and logistics to turn individual battalions into an effective fighting brigade, and spread over four countries, those four battalions would be picked off piecemeal should Russia attack.” The need for urgent investment is very clear indeed.

Of course, we prosecute our defence posture in Europe through NATO. We must also urgently make the argument to our allies about the need for them, like us, to spend at least 2% of their GDP on defence. We are one of only five countries that do that. If NATO is to be a credible deterrent to a resurgent Russia, that needs to change.

NATO is not without its problems, but we must express a collective political will in NATO if it is to be credible. It is alarming that in 2015 the Leader of the Opposition called for NATO to be “closed down” and for it to “give up, go home and go away.”

It is on the record that he has refused to say whether he would defend a NATO ally if it was invaded by Russia. That is astonishing, because a collective deterrent and collective defence is the fundamental basis of NATO, as stated in article 5.

On another outrageous Russian foreign policy act, namely the invasion of Crimea, an adviser to the Leader of the Opposition is on the record as saying that, in his view, it was not an invasion but an annexation that was “clearly defensive” and that “western aggression and lawless killing is on another scale entirely from anything Russia appears to have contemplated, let alone carried out—removing any credible basis for the US and its allies to rail against Russian transgressions.”

If NATO is to be the basis of our collective deterrent, we need to express political will and political conviction.

On Crimea, I will conclude by quoting a former Prime Minister of Great Britain who understood the importance of peace through strength and of deterring Russian expansionism and aggression through a credible military force. Speaking in 1858, Lord Palmerston knew a thing or two about dealing with Russia, because back then, of course, we were engaged in the Crimean conflict. He said:

“The policy and practice of the Russian Government has always been to push forward its encroachments as fast and as far as the apathy or want of firmness of other Governments would allow it to go, but always to stop and retire when it met with decided resistance”.

We must provide that decided resistance, and we must not allow the voices of apathy or those who want firmness in their political conviction to our collective security to undermine that. I hope that that attitude of peace through strength will guide not just our investment in our defence and our engagement with Europe, but our security policy as a whole.

4.13 pm
Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): There is an old saying that nature abhors a vacuum. Similarly, business abhors uncertainty, and in no industry is that more true than in the automotive sector. As the Government’s sector report makes clear, investment decisions and sourcing choices in the industry are often made by European or global headquarters, and the continued uncertainty about training arrangements are making it ask serious questions about whether it will invest in this country in the future.

Uncertainty across a sector can have a real impact, particularly in communities such as mine where the sector represents a big chunk of the jobs market. The Vauxhall Motors factory in my constituency is currently facing huge uncertainty. Until recently, it employed
1,800 people directly, with many more jobs in the supply chain, so there is no doubt that it is of pivotal importance to the area I represent. How such companies fare in the post-Brexit world will decide how I and my constituents judge the Government’s handling of the negotiations, because when it comes to the crunch, what happens on people’s doorsteps is what really matters to them.

The key choices about Vauxhall’s future rest in the hands of its owners, PSA, which is based in France. We know from decisions already made that it shows no sentiment. We have already lost about 700 jobs since it took over, and these job losses are extremely serious. We are told that they are a reaction to market conditions, with a decline in sales of the Astra. Market conditions are not of course within the gift of the Government, but what is within their gift are the conditions within which business can trade, and this is where the Government really need to start listening to the industry—and acting. Traditionally, the automotive sector makes investment decisions about three to five years in advance, so decisions about investment in a post-Brexit world will be made shortly. The current model in production in Ellesmere Port is due to be discontinued at about the same time in 2021. The chief executive of PSA recently told the BBC: “We cannot invest in a world of uncertainty”, so now is the time for the Government to provide them with that certainty.

The automotive sector, as we know, is one of the most productive and successful we have, directly or indirectly employing over 800,000 people and generating almost 10% of the country’s manufacturing output. We know that about half of all UK car production is exported to the EU, and that figure rises to 70% to 80% for vehicles produced at the Vauxhall plant in my constituency. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee recently found that “leaving the EU without a deal would undoubtedly be hugely damaging to the UK automotive sector, more so than to other European countries.”

It concluded:

“Overall, no-one has argued there are advantages to be gained from Brexit for the automotive industry for the foreseeable future.”

Now that we are leaving the EU, it is important to recognise that this is one of our most vulnerable sectors, and there is no upside for it. We therefore need to do everything possible to safeguard jobs and investment. History shows us that once manufacturing jobs are lost, they very rarely come back. So far the response from the Government has been inadequate and complacent, and the sense of denial is palpable.

Of course, it was never meant to be this way. Both during and after the referendum, too many people have exaggerated the simplicity of all this. The Brexit Secretary assured us that we would soon be able to access “a very, very large trade area, much bigger than the European Union, probably ten times the size”, despite the fact that if it was that big, it would cover an area twice the size of the planet. The Foreign Secretary promised us that without “the job-destroying coils of EU bureaucracy we can survive and thrive as never before.”

The International Trade Secretary said that securing a UK-EU trade deal would be “one of the easiest in human history”. Yet even with such esteemed and self-confident people negotiating on our behalf, we still do not know—629 days after the referendum—what the deal will be.

When Cabinet Ministers are pressed on these issues, I have seen them bluffing complacently with dangerous fantasies about the promised green and pleasant land that will apparently emerge before our eyes without any effort being invested. The Prime Minister in her Mansion House speech said that new trading arrangements would need good will to succeed, but that sounds more like crossing one’s fingers and hoping for the best. My constituents’ jobs need more than that and the people who employ them need more than that to invest, so the Government need to understand that the once proud automotive heritage will be lost to the past unless we can secure its future. This is an industry that will survive and flourish only if we are prepared to fight for it. Even if it turns out to be the simple negotiation that the International Trade Secretary promised us, he needs to realise that for there to be an automotive sector in this country that will continue to trade with the rest of the world, it needs to be protected now, so the Government must act.

For me, a commitment to a customs union is the only sensible way to restore certainty and confidence, not some vague and ill-defined customs partnership that may or may not be the same as it is now. We know the argument about how a customs union will have an impact on future trade deals elsewhere, but I do not think that getting a couple of quid off trainers from China is actually a price worth paying for the destruction of the UK car industry. In response to a written question from me about which non-EU countries had been identified as the best ones for future trade deals in the automotive sector, the Minister for Trade Policy said:

“We are working with a number of other countries to explore the best ways to develop our current trade and investment relationships”.

That did not tell me anything, including about whether there are any such opportunities outside the EU.

If it is a choice between preserving trade with up to 80% of our existing customers, as against perhaps getting some new business with some unspecified countries at some unspecified time in the future, I know what every person with an ounce of common sense will choose. The choice for the Government is clear, and if they make the wrong one, we will never forgive them and we will never forget.

4.19 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who made a really important speech on defending the car industry. I appreciate the ongoing concerns about Vauxhall in his constituency and the impact that that may have on jobs. I also understand that the Astra model is drawing to the end of its life, and the Vauxhall plant in Ellesmere Port needs to gear up for the next model that comes along. We must do all we can to ensure that the British car industry is ready for the next Astra model and for many other firms. The infrastructure that goes into the car industry is so important, and we have made progress in recent years. Just two or three years ago, we became a net exporter of
cars for the first time since the ’70s, and that progress was founded on the other qualities of our United Kingdom. That is why Nissan and Toyota are investing in the United Kingdom.

There are many different arguments in the Brexit debate, and I understand why my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said earlier that the tone of the debate is not what it could and, indeed, should be. A significant part of the reason for that is the interpretation that some people choose to make of other people’s arguments. It is better and healthier for people to make their own case and their own arguments and to enable others to compare those contrasting arguments and see which is best.

People continue to raise a point about the red bus touring the country and swaying the votes of so many people. In the run-up to the referendum, I held numerous events in and around my constituency to listen to people’s concerns, but I did not meet one person from the leave side of the argument who said, “I’ve been convinced to vote to leave the European Union because of the red bus.” People no more switched their view because of that bus than they did because of Labour’s pink bus in 2015. We must be cautious about ascribing motivations to other people.

By and large, I believe that people made their judgment and voted on whether to leave the European Union based on their experiences over the past 40-plus years, whether under a Conservative, Labour or coalition Government. People have seen that the European Union has been failing to reform over that time. We do not have in the European Union a sufficiently responsive organisation that can adapt quickly to the increasingly rapidly changing world we face.

The ability to adapt is key in any dynamic economy. Artificial intelligence, increasing automation and many different things are coming along the line, and if we are able, independently, to make laws and regulations to suit our needs in the United Kingdom, as opposed to having regulations and laws that suit the needs of the European Union, with its different competing interests, we will be in a far better place to face the ever-changing world.

A key part of that is immigration. The contribution by the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) was really important and she highlighted her relationship with Austria. Just as we want a close relationship with Austria, Germany, Italy and many other European Union countries, we ought to reflect on what Barbara Castle, the former MP for Blackburn, said many years ago. She suggested that we ought not to put Italians, Germans and the French above Malayans, Australians or Indians, and we ought to be seeking that equality.

There is a certain toxicity to the debate on immigration in the United Kingdom. I loathe that; it is repugnant. I believe that we can have an immigration system post Brexit that objectively looks at the qualities, values, experiences, abilities and talents of those people who we want in the United Kingdom and optimise an immigration policy that works for Britain. The British people will then increasingly see how positive our independence from the European Union can be.

In conclusion, I want to highlight an area that has in the past few months been absolutely fascinating. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has made incredible strides in demonstrating the progress we can make and deliver on in relation to animal welfare post Brexit. I believe the British people did not have confidence in belonging to the European Union, but that with a good negotiation, deal and ongoing relationship, we may have confidence in our ongoing partnership with our European friends post Brexit.

4.25 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): In the time available, I would like to touch on a number of points that are relevant to the debate, starting with what has been its main crux this afternoon: the future trading relationship between the EU and the UK.

Yesterday, the European Parliament passed a resolution on the framework of the future trade relationship, which will feed into next week’s EU summit and the EU negotiating position. It reiterates the position taken by Plaid Cymru from the very first day since the referendum result: the best course of action would be for us to stay in the single market and the customs union. That is the only realistic solution to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland and—this of equal concern to me—a hard border in Wales at the ports of Holyhead, Fishguard and Pembroke Dock. The EU has frozen talks until the British Government come up with a solution to this problem, but it is on a plate for the British Government, if they would only listen to the evidence.

This is perhaps an opportunity to discuss the Labour party’s policy on a customs union, which is completely different—it is more or less a souped-up trade deal. A customs union is what Turkey has. It does not benefit from all the international trade agreements that the EU currently has. We have had a long discussion today about the 50 or 60 trade areas that they entail, which are cumulatively worth about £140 billion to UK trade. We would lose that. The other factor with a customs union is that while the UK would lose the benefit of the deals with third countries that are currently aspects of the EU customs union, those countries would be able to import into the UK. I had thought that Labour’s solution was a way of dealing with the problem of Northern Ireland, but Turkey needs lorry parks on the border with Hungary and Romania to deal with its border issues. That would be the case in Northern Ireland, so the proposal would not deal with the major issue of the border on the island of Ireland.

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research says that the cost to households in the UK will be about £600 per annum. Rabobank has put the cost of a no-deal Brexit at £11,500 per person. I think that the biggest cost relates to our public services. Some 20% of doctors working in the Welsh NHS come from the European Union. A number have already left. Some 4% of EU doctors in Wales have said they are considering leaving and another 12% have already made plans to go. Last week, I attended a summit with Hywel Dda University health board in my constituency about huge reorganisation plans for the health service in the west of my country. The closure of hospitals is on the table because staff cannot be recruited and retained, and Brexit will make that problem far worse.

Plaid Cymru recently won a vote on the Floor of the House for the first time in our 50-year history of service in the House of Commons on a motion on protecting
EU citizenship for UK subjects. Now that the British Government have been mandated by the House of Commons, I look forward to them making progress on that. Indeed, yesterday’s resolution in the European Parliament reaffirmed Plaid Cymru’s position.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Throughout the entire process of Brexit, people have been talking about taking back control and respecting the sovereignty of the House. I am sure that, like me, my hon. Friend is therefore looking forward to the UK Government adhering to that motion, which was passed unanimously by this House.

Jonathan Edwards: We look forward, as I am sure my comrades in the SNP do, to holding the Government to account on the result of last week’s very important debate.

With regard to a meaningful vote, Members should not be in a position in which we can vote for either a bad deal or no deal. That position was outlined in the other place yesterday when my colleague, Lord Wigley, raised this issue. That strengthens the argument put forward by a number of Members, in particular the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who made the case for a second referendum on the terms of the deal.

I disagree slightly with the argument of the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) that there has been no change in public opinion, and I speak from my experience. When I was at the hairdressers in Ammanford on Friday, I spoke to many people who voted out. They were pleading with me to sort out the mess that we now face and said that they would now vote differently. On Saturday morning, when I was buying tiles with my wife in Cross Hands for the bathroom in our home, everybody there said exactly the same thing. I think there has been a big change in public opinion. If people were given the opportunity to vote on the facts before them, there would be a change of opinion.

The next issue I want to discuss is the prospect of no deal. We often hear from pro-Brexit MPs that that should be a bargaining position to hold against the European Union. As the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) excellently set out, a no-deal scenario for the European Union. As the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) excellently set out, a no-deal scenario for the European Union. As the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) excellently set out, a no-deal scenario for the European Union.

I will conclude on perhaps one of the biggest issues, which relates to Brexit’s constitutional implications: the power grab that is now facing and impacting on the Welsh Government, the Scottish Government, the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament.

Mrs Moon: The Prime Minister has repeatedly said that Brexit means Brexit, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that she does not seem to understand that devolution means devolution?

Jonathan Edwards: I fully agree. We have had two referendums in Wales to enshrine our constitutional settlement, but we have a British Government who are driving a sledgehammer through that settlement. I enjoyed the phrase “puppet Parliament” that was used by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood). The reality is that if clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill goes through unamended, and unless the British Government accept the recommendations of the Welsh Government and the Scottish Government, our respective Parliaments would be puppet Parliaments within the British state.

That brings me to the new UK internal market that will have to be created following Brexit. Of course, we currently have the EU internal market, which deals with issues of trade within the British state. As somebody who supports Welsh independence, I recognise that there will have to be a UK internal market, if we end up leaving the EU single market, but the challenge at hand is who constructs that UK internal market. Will that be done on the basis of the political reality that we face in the British state—a multipolar state with four national Governments—or will it done through direct rule from Westminster? That is about not only the construction of the internal market, but how it is regulated.

Let me finish on this point: Westminster plays about with the constitutional settlements of Scotland and Wales at its peril. Unless respect is shown to the Welsh Government and to the people of Wales and the people of Scotland, instead of the disrespect agenda that we have at the moment, we will be discussing not Brexit in the years to come, but “Wexit” and “Scexit”.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but on account of recent interventions, the time limit for the remaining Back Benchers will have to be reduced to five minutes each, because otherwise the Front Benchers will not have adequate time to wind up. That is the consequence of interventions that some people might think are superfluous, but others will think are essential.

4.33 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I was going to conclude slightly early anyway, Mr Speaker, out of courtesy, so that another Member could make their speech.

It has been interesting to listen to much of this debate this afternoon. Some right hon. and hon. Members have held their positions on this issue for a very long time, but for me, this is about trying to set out briefly—in the five minutes I have—the vision we should have for the future.

It seems a long time ago when we think back to the end of the cold war and the iron curtain across Europe. The idea of free trade and a free market zone spreading into the east of Europe—potentially even to Russia—was something that people started to debate and think about. Of course, some 10 or 14 years back, we saw the European Union expanding to many countries that had been decimated by communism. They have now been able to become free democracies and have started to become prosperous. The difference is that what then came was another attempt to try to turn the European Union into a federal state, for example through the creation of its own currency. I remember at university 20 years ago people arguing that London would be decimated and that people would move out if we did not join the euro. I remember buying a book by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) that argued that that was a load of nonsense.
I did vote remain in the referendum two years ago—as I believe I was entitled to do as things then were. I did not feel it was right to hold the referendum again and again. I do not think we should focus entirely on the 27 other members of the EU. I have always felt that in the long run, subject to all the usual caveats about preserving our national sovereignty, there is a much greater need for us to focus on what drives migrant flows to European stability and security may arise, especially those that are driven by economic insecurity and political instability in the countries of origin.

Free trade cannot be a one-way process. It cannot be what we started to see a few years ago in Africa: a one-way trip of dumping subsidised products on to developing world markets to put people who were trying to compete with us on a level playing field out of business. One of the reasons why I have always supported free trade is the principle that it must work both ways, although that can sometimes lead to a more difficult argument.

Brexit gives us a chance to review our agricultural policies, which date from an era when we were concerned about whether we would be able to feed ourselves if the next convoy coming across the Atlantic was torpedoed. That consideration is now completely irrelevant. Nevertheless, there are some difficult discussions to have. As we move away from subsides—there will be those who have become quite comfortable as a result of particular subsidies—we must discuss how we can shift from a system based on production to one that is based more on sustainability and diversification, perhaps with a greater focus on smaller producers than on large agribusinesses.

I welcomed what my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) said about security. If I had a little more time, I might dwell slightly more on that subject, and on the fact that European affairs could well be dominated by what Russia decides to do over the next few years. We should be clear about one key fact: someone with a Russian passport must be a country and fled to safer nations to take Putin’s line that someone with a Russian passport must be a supporter of Vladimir Putin. It does a great disservice to many people who were oppressed in that country and fled to safer nations to take Putin’s line that someone with a Russian passport must be a supporter of united Russia. Many such people are not, and many have paid for that with their lives.

Sadly, Putin seems to be starting to tread the well-worn path that has led Europe to conflict in the past. If he decides to continue down that path, we must make it very clear that we will be resolute in standing with our allies across Europe to ensure that any provocation or further attempts to destabilise countries in the way in which Putin has destabilised Ukraine would be met with a united and firm response. That is why what the Prime Minister did this week was absolutely right. We must also look towards the south, where other threats to European stability and security may arise, especially given the growth of instability in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, which is an aspect of what drives migrant flows towards our southern shores.

I do not have much time left, so let me conclude by stressing that Brexit is about leaving a political structure, not a continent. It is about viewing our neighbours not as opponents, but as future allies.

4.38 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow so many eloquent—and some long—contributions.

I wonder how many arch-Brexiteers have actually spoken to people who work in or run businesses to learn about the impacts of not only Brexit but uncertainty about Brexit, and how it is affecting decisions in their constituencies at this moment. I have done that, and I am going to share just two examples with the House. One is a specific small company, and the other is in a major sector. I would have covered more, but have had to cut and cut my speech as the second half of the afternoon has progressed.

The owner of a small and medium-sized enterprise, a research company, wished to remain anonymous, but wanted me to know his position. He wrote to me:

“I run a small business and have already lost out because of Brexit (due to the drop in sterling putting up the cost of our cloud computing by 20% and uncertainty over future research funding). There are lots of detailed questions for my business that I have no idea how to answer, and I don’t have armies of lawyers and accountants to work out for me. So much for the Tories cutting red tape. Such as, if there is a hard Brexit, will there be an uninterrupted service from all the cloud computing currently supplied via companies based in Ireland? Will I be able to access my data and information on day one—or need new customs clearance or change my data protection set up? Will cloud computing be treated as an import with tariffs—and therefore add to my operating costs and accounting costs as I grapple with new HMRC rules? These are things that could tip my very small, struggling, business over the edge. I’m sure we’re not the only vulnerable SME.”

He goes on:

“More generally, MPs say they will protect jobs. In my sector income”—rather than jobs—“is already moving judging by conversations I am having with partners and in my networks. Contingency plans are already being enacted by SMEs. I know of companies who have set up offices in mainland EU and are starting to channel work through there, even if it is UK-based staff doing it, for now. I am being paid in Euro for some work that previously would have been in sterling, which exposes me to risks I can’t offset. This is all completely legal. Two of my most talented EU colleagues have left the UK because they ‘don’t feel welcome’—they both lived here as children but having become parents themselves believe the situation is too uncertain to keep their roots here…In my view, the loss to Britain will be this invisible drip-drip of lost talent and money rather than announcements of big job losses by big employers and will only become apparent when it is too late.”

Secondly, my constituency is home to a large number of broadcast organisations—household names such as Sky, and myriad others, many whose main market is not even in the UK—and many of my constituents work in broadcasting, including a few household names. The UK dominates Europe’s broadcasting sector due to the availability of skilled employees and English being the dominant language in the industry. Thanks to the country of origin principle, hundreds of international media organisations are based here and can broadcast...
Yesterday, the Minister for Trade Policy, the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), congratulated the Government on bringing forward the trade and customs Bills and suggested that “they have been designed to prepare us for every eventuality, although they will be needed regardless of the outcome of our negotiations with the EU. They will give us a strong trade remedies regime.”—[Official Report, 14 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 915.]

However, they have not prepared us for every eventuality. In fact, they prepare us for no eventuality whatsoever as they fail to set out any legislative procedure for future trade agreements or for the protections of our rights and standards. As for the trade remedies authority, it has been described by the Manufacturing Trade Remedies Alliance, the industry body representing our manufacturing sector, as being the weakest in the world. The Opposition recognised the need for a trade remedies authority in our reasoned amendment on Second Reading. In Committee, we tried to strengthen the powers and the contribution that the authority will need to make, but the Government voted against and defeated every single one of our amendments. The Government know that they are in trouble with those Bills, which is why they are afraid to bring them back here. As many right hon. and hon. Members have pointed out, significant matters remain unresolved, and no credible solution has been presented by the Government, but they are none the less eager to rule options out.

The UK’s trade with the EU accounts for 44% of our total exports—some £229 billion. A further 16% of our exports go to those 70 or so countries that are party to some form of a trade agreement with the EU, including South Korea, Norway and Switzerland. In short, the majority of our trade is with EU or countries with which the EU has a trade agreement. The EU is of course the largest trading bloc in the world, and it is inconceivable that any trade agreement that the UK might be able to conclude with countries outside the EU would make up for the potential loss of trade once we leave. Of course, the UK will have to conclude new agreements with those countries that have an agreement with the EU, and the Government have attempted to spin the Trade Bill as being simply about that.

However, some of the agreements may well be significantly different from existing arrangements. South Korea, Chile and the other countries involved may well want an agreement with the UK after we leave the EU, but the question is why those countries would want to agree to the same terms that we currently enjoy as EU members. Furthermore, they will want to ensure that there is no overall disruption to their current trade with the EU. Of course, they will want a clear picture of what our future agreement with the EU looks like. Everybody is out for the best they can get for themselves. Every opportunity to take a little more and give a little less will be capitalised upon.

We already know that some of these countries, such as South Korea and Chile, have told the EU that they want to revise terms of their existing deals once the UK has left. Meanwhile, other countries have publicly called for changes to their trade with the UK after Brexit, calling for divergence from EU standards or liberalisation in tariff rate quotas. They do not want the same terms as before; they want better terms—for them, not for the UK. It will come down to who has the upper hand and the benefit of experience in trade talks.
Investors want to know whether they will be able to continue to participate in European supply chains and how rules of origin will apply after Brexit. Will they have to complete arduous customs declarations and advanced screening applications? Will their goods be held up at ports and train stations? It is clear that the Government have absolutely no idea what to do about the border on the island of Ireland. The Government have repeatedly told us that they will not have a hard border, nor will they have a border at sea. They have told us there will be no infrastructure on the border, yet they have also suggested that a digital border will be put in place and have hinted that it will involve CCTV and automatic number-plate recognition technology. Quite how CCTV and ANPR can exist without infrastructure, I do not know; that is a step even further in the Secretary of State’s blue-sky thinking. That proposition is untried and untested, and it has been dismissed categorically by businesses, the Irish Government and the European Union. Even if that were not the case, it would require a substantial systems overhaul across the European Union as well as in the UK, and HMRC has already said that it would not be in a position to roll that out by the time the UK leaves the EU.

Further, the success of any border arrangement, if such an arrangement could be found, would depend entirely on the extent to which UK regulations and standards were compatible with those of the EU. Those are fundamental questions, but despite 20 months having passed since the referendum result and a year since article 50 was triggered, the Government are no further on with answers to them.

Many of those issues would be substantially resolved if, as the Opposition have suggested, the Government were to negotiate a new, bespoke, comprehensive UK-EU customs union. Such a customs union would allow existing trade arrangements to be rolled over with minimal changes. That is what the Government say that they want. Disruption to trade, such as changes to rules of origin requirements and diagonal cumulation, would also be avoided.

Under Labour’s suggested approach, we would work alongside the EU in new trade arrangements. It is shocking that the Government have drawn a red line of not being in a customs union, without modelling the effects either way. If we agreed an EU-UK customs union, the EU would be enhanced by having the strength of the world’s sixth-largest economy joining it in negotiations, and we would be strengthened by negotiating alongside the largest trading bloc in the world.

Our approach would also remove the need for customs checkpoints and accompanying infrastructure on roads between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Our approach recognises that the EU is the largest market in the world, and that we are stronger in future negotiations alongside it. The Labour party seeks solutions to the problems that the Government have presented to the country.

4.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to today’s debate, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part. I have very much enjoyed closely following the debate and the valuable contributions that have been made, and I am sorry that I will not be able to acknowledge them all in the eight minutes that remain.

I want to acknowledge the range of advice that the Government have been given, from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), who made a strong case for no deal, to my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who made a strong argument for the customs union and EFTA, to which I will return in a moment. I was also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) for representing his constituents by supporting the Prime Minister’s centre ground position.

The Prime Minister has been very clear that the UK will leave the EU on 29 March 2019, a date that is fixed as a matter of international and UK law under the article 50 process. That position respects the vote of the people in the referendum on 23 June 2016 to leave the EU, and there will not be a second referendum. As the Prime Minister set out in her Mansion House speech, our decision to leave the EU does not mark an ending; it marks a new beginning for our relationship with our European allies. We want the closest possible partnership. It is pragmatic common sense that we should work together to deliver the best outcome for both sides, and that is what we are doing.

I want to take a little time to talk about some of the solutions that have been proposed in relation to off-the-shelf models. As we have emphasised, we do not want an off-the-shelf solution or an existing model; we want the greatest possible tariff-free and barrier-free trade with our European neighbours, as well as to negotiate our own free trade agreements around the world, particularly in relation to our comparative advantage in services.

We want to ensure that UK companies have the maximum freedom to trade with and operate in European markets, and we want to let European businesses do the same in the UK. But we have always said that we are not looking for a Norway-style deal or a Canada-style deal. There is no point starting from scratch as we build our new relationship, because, unlike a country such as Canada, we start from the position of already having the same rules and regulations as the EU. Seeking a Norway-style agreement based on participation in the EEA agreement would not pass the first test that the Prime Minister set out for our future economic partnership with the EU. It would deliver control of neither our borders, nor our laws.

On borders, remaining in the EEA agreement would mean that we had to continue to accept all four freedoms of the single market, including freedom of movement. On laws, continued participation in the EEA agreement would mean the UK having to adopt at home, automatically and in their entirety, new EU rules, over which in future we will have little influence and no vote. This would not deliver the British people’s desire to have more direct control over the decisions that affect their daily lives.

Membership of EFTA, in and of itself, does not deliver any market access to the EU; it is a trading bloc between four European countries, Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein. Three of those countries participate in the EU’s single market through the EEA agreement, while Switzerland participates in some areas through a series of bilateral agreements with the EU. Therefore, joining EFTA does not say anything about our future economic partnership with the EU. Although
we want to maintain our deep and historical relationships with the EFTA states, the UK is in many ways different from those countries. Our population is about 65 million, whereas the EFTA states together comprise about 14 million people. In 2015, the EFTA bloc’s collective GDP amounted to £710 billion, which compares with the UK’s £1.9 trillion. So the UK’s participation in EFTA would fundamentally change the nature of that group and would not be an appropriate model for our future relationship with the EU or with those countries.

Anna Soubry: I was making the case for the single market and the EEA, and I am sure the Minister would agree that that is not an extreme position to hold.

Mr Baker: I listened carefully to the words my right hon. Friend used and I am sure the record will show that she referred to EFTA, but I am glad she has clarified that, in saying she supports EFTA, she means EFTA as an EEA member. But I stand by the remarks I just made. I hope she will not mind my saying to her gently that from the perspective of many who want to leave the EU, saying that we want to solve the problems of leaving the EU by staying in the EU’s internal market, with all that that entails for non-member states, and staying within the EU’s customs union, so that we have to accept the EU’s common commercial policy, appears to suggest that we must solve the problems of the EU by, de facto, staying within it. That is how it comes across to many people who wish sincerely to leave the EU. I did listen carefully to her—[ Interruption. ]

The hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) mentions transition, and of course we have set out the case for the implementation period.

I must press on, because I want particularly to pick up a point relating to borders and migration.

Heidi Alexander: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Baker: I want to make this point, but if I have time, I will give way to the hon. Lady. Remaining in the EEA agreement would mean having to continue to accept all four freedoms of the single market, including freedom of movement. Although it is true that Liechtenstein has unique arrangements on the movement of people, the UK is in many respects different from Liechtenstein, a country whose population is less than almost every UK constituency. We can safely anticipate that this exemption afforded to a micro-state would not be afforded to the UK.

I very much regret that, with only two minutes to go, I will have dramatically to shorten my speech. On the customs union, Turkey’s customs union with the UK does not cover certain sectors that would be vital to the UK economy and it does not guarantee frictionless trade across the whole economy, because of course a customs union alone does not solve some of the—[ Interruption. ]

Opposition Front Benchers are saying that this is not what they are looking for. They are looking to be in the customs union and remain harmonised with the regulations of the EU—that is the implication of their position. The implication of their position is that they do not wish to leave the EU. They want the EU to control our tariffs. They would be happy for it to control our laws. They would be happy to accept free movement. This is not what people voted for.

We must not lose sight of our ultimate aim to build a new comprehensive partnership that sees us stay the closest of friends and allies. As the Prime Minister has set out, our vision is of a UK that is a champion of free trade, based on a high standard, thriving as a global Britain which forges a bold and ambitious comprehensive economic partnership with our neighbours in the EU and reaches out beyond to foster trade agreements with nations across the globe. As we approach this March, Economic Council, both sides in these negotiations have agreed that we want a common fight against terrorism and crime; we want participation and co-operation on research, innovation, culture and education; we want to avoid the absurdities of the interruption of flights; and we want a trade agreement covering all sectors, with zero tariffs on goods and addressing services. We shall succeed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered European Affairs.

PETITION
Royal Bank of Scotland closure in Stepps

5 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Ten years ago, we, the taxpayer, bailed out the Royal Bank of Scotland during the financial crisis. Now, the Royal Bank of Scotland is trying to bail from communities such as Stepps by closing down much-valued local branches. At the weekend, I joined community activists, councillors and the local Member of the Scottish Parliament, Fulton MacGregor, to gather signatures for this petition.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Glasgow East,

Declares that the proposed closure of the Stepps branch of publicly-owned Royal Bank of Scotland will have a detrimental effect on local communities and the local economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Her Majesty’s Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Royal Bank of Scotland to take in account the concerns of petitioners and take whatever steps they can to halt the planned closure of the branches.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
CERN Pensions: UK Tax Treatment

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mike Freer.]

5.1 pm

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I rise to discuss the UK tax treatment of CERN pensioners, but the subject goes rather wider than purely CERN. I mention CERN only because I have two or three constituents who are quite exercised by recent changes.

George Osborne brought in a change to do away with the concession whereby people with foreign pensions were taxed on 90% of their income, pushing that up to 100% in 2017-18. That has had a material effect on several of my constituents, but there must be people who worked for a number of organisations who are affected by the tax change when they land pensions back into the United Kingdom. I shall talk a little about CERN, but also about one or two other international organisations, because the more I look into this issue, the more complex it becomes.

CERN was set up by UNESCO in 1954 as an international organisation, based in Geneva, to carry out fundamental research in high-energy physics. The UK was among its 12 founding members; today, there are 22 member states. The host nations are Switzerland and France, and most of those who work at CERN on a day-to-day basis live in either Switzerland or France, in or around the vicinity of Geneva. CERN served as a model for successful European collaboration, and several similar organisations, working in fields such as space research, have since been created, based on its structure.

On retiring, CERN staff receive pensions in Swiss francs. They are not ungenerous pensions—some are in six figures—because these people are extremely able, talented scientists who have committed themselves to science. CERN staff can either stay in one of the host states or move elsewhere. Many member states offer favourable tax treatment to attract such staff to their country. They range from Austria, which allows CERN staff to retire tax-free, to Spain, Malta and Sweden, where low rates have been negotiated, typically in the order of 10%.

The UK never gave any kind of special privileges to CERN retirees, but there was provision under our tax law that 90% of foreign pensions would be taxed. If someone is on a six-figure pension and the first £8,000 or £10,000 is disregarded, bringing them down in all the various tax brackets, that concession is worth having. CERN pensioners, who are particularly bright, have to decide where they are going to land themselves and their families when they have finished working. Many wish to move back to the UK, and they previously saw the UK Government’s more modest concession as attractive enough for them to retire to places such as Poole.

I make one very important point about CERN pensioners: they have not benefited from UK tax concessions in any way. They do not get the 25% tax-free cash payment that a UK taxpayer gets. Effectively, they have earned their pension by working abroad for an international organisation in which we have a big interest. They have come back to the UK and then been given a slightly better tax position, probably in recognition of the fact that many people who have foreign pensions do not benefit from the reduced rate available to those who contribute to pensions in this country.

Pensioners of other international organisations that are similar to CERN do receive special concessions from the UK Treasury. I understand that there are organisations that represent those who have worked for the UN, or its various agencies, and that discussions are going on about the appropriate rate. I also know that there are discussions about pensioners from the World Bank. A number of European organisations work under similar terms and conditions as CERN. Known as the co-ordinated organisations, they include: the Council of Europe; the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts; the European Space Agency; the European Organisation for the Exploitation of Meteorological Satellites; the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation; and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The International Service for Remunerations and Pensions, which is based in Paris, is responsible for the pay and rations of all those bodies. As I understand it, the civil servants who work for these co-ordinated organisations are taxed on only 50% of their salaries.

There are therefore examples of concessionary rates for organisations in which Britain participates, and my constituents have a very simple request: if the UK Treasury is not going to tax them on 50% of their income, which I somehow doubt that it will, they wish to go back to the 90% rate with which they were happy. Many decided to move back to the United Kingdom on the basis of that proposition. I stress that, because some of the pensions are high, over 20 years, the amount in question represents probably a couple of million pounds’ worth of sterling. We should bear in mind that the money is landed back in the UK in Swiss francs, and that it is not only taxed but spent in the United Kingdom.

There is actually a very strong economic argument for making a pitch to people with good international salaries to come back to the UK to retire in order to feed the very important column that is UK invisible earnings. My constituents thought that they would be taxed at only 90%, but feel that the rules have changed, so they would like the UK Government to reconsider.

When I asked the House of Commons Library what happened to civil servants who retired from the EU, I was told very politely that the EU taxed them and kept the money. I am very surprised that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs—it must be letting the side down—does not have any say over EU civil servants who retire back to the UK. I suspect that that is one of those fine points of detail that will be dealt with in the withdrawal negotiations. If those people were given a preferential arrangement, I would be extremely surprised if the UK Government were to change that and make those people’s pensions taxable at 100%.

This complex area involves a number of tax treaties and several international organisations, all of which operate to a different range of rules. My essential point is that a few of my constituents who worked hard in the scientific sector and earned good pensions thought that they had a proposition that meant that they were taxed at 90%, but now feel somewhat aggrieved that the previous Chancellor has pushed the rate up to 100%. As I have said, that was not the most generous tax proposition—those of other countries are far more generous—but that rate was attractive enough to get
these people to move to places such as Poole. I hope that the UK Government will consider the options. Given that this is a complex area, I wonder if the Minister might be willing to meet me and a few CERN pensioners to discuss the matter more fully so that we can get to the bottom of whether they are being treated fairly and reasonably.

Finally, I congratulate the Minister on taking his post. He is among the Members on these Benches who I always thought was destined for high things. He had to start somewhere, and Economic Secretary to the Treasury is a fine and important post.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury.

5.10 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): I can always count on my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) to put me in my place.

I thank my hon. Friend for raising the matter of CERN’s work in the week in which we lost that great physicist, Stephen Hawking. One of the few scientific bets that he lost in his career was that the Higgs boson would never be found, so even somebody of his genius can get things wrong every now and again.

The Government are committed to a fair and consistent tax system. This is especially important in pensions, as the Government promote saving through tax incentives and allowances. We want those incentives to work and to be fairly distributed. My hon. Friend outlined the history of the issue before us today. As he said, the Government reviewed this regime at autumn statement 2016, and announced that the UK tax treatment of foreign pensions would be changed to be closely aligned with that of UK pensions. Following that, the Finance Act 2017 legislated so that, with effect from 6 April 2017, 100% of income from foreign pensions has been liable to UK tax; it was previously 90%. This aligns the tax treatment of UK pensioners with the treatment of those who earn their pension overseas, ensuring a fair system. At the outset when contributions are made towards a pension—whether that pension is UK or foreign—they are usually free of any tax paid in the UK. With this change, the tax treatment of contributions and payments are now consistent.

My hon. Friend raised a series of points on which I hope to provide some clarity. He was kind enough to speak to me before this debate and mention a number of international organisations where British citizens work and make a valuable contribution, including the OECD, NATO, the United Nations and others. My hon. Friend noted that pensioners from these international organisations or organisations of a similar type are reimbursed, for example, 50% of their income tax payments. It is important to say that this does not arise as a result of any country’s tax rules. It is not because of a particular deal made by the United Kingdom with any of these organisations, but because of the specific provisions within the pension scheme of that international organisation.

It would be CERN’s decision whether it wanted to make a similar provision in its pension scheme either for the future, or to reopen and reassess their past practice for CERN pensioners who had retired, were drawing on their pensions and are now my hon. Friend’s constituents. Any payments received by UK residents are subject to UK tax, including reimbursement. That is the case for all international organisations. I will return to the EU, which, as is so often the case, has special treatment.

The UK only supports special tax treatment for international organisations when the employees have worked for the organisation in the UK, which I hope my hon. Friend will understand is a somewhat different situation for tax purposes. Aside from the EU, the UK has no bilateral agreements in relation to the tax treatment of international organisations with other countries. We do with the EU, which is our only exception, and that is common practice across the Union.

My hon. Friend mentioned international comparisons. We understand that other major economies are typically taking a similar approach to the UK with respect to taxing pensions. Countries such as France, Germany and Switzerland all tax occupational pensions such as CERN’s and the foreign income of their residents. There may be other examples such as those that he raised and spoke to me about earlier. Of course, I am happy to look into that. It may be a topic that we could discuss were we to meet. Certainly, our major international competitors and the countries from which, one presumes, a majority of CERN’s employees are drawn take an approach similar to the one that we have taken.

In our correspondence prior to this debate, my hon. Friend suggested that the Government could introduce a 25% tax relief on CERN pensions to mirror the tax-free lump sum. I understand that that would be an attractive proposition for CERN pensioners. However, the tax-free lump sum is not an allowance. If a qualifying lump sum is not paid, this relief is not available. These lump sums can be paid free of UK tax whether built up in a foreign or a UK pension if the qualifying conditions are met. Allowing for 25% tax relief outside of these circumstances would, we believe—I hope that my hon. Friend will understand this—undermine these qualifying conditions, which apply to all pensioners.

I hope that my comments have at least explained the rationale behind the Government’s policy. I appreciate the concerns that my hon. Friend raises. I assure him that the Government have not sought to target individuals unfairly or to impact on the work undertaken by those at CERN or, indeed, by any other of our citizens who choose to live and work abroad. As he says, this is an incredibly important and increasingly prevalent aspect of the modern labour force, with increasing globalisation and a global market for the most talented individuals, certainly in the scientific and research world.

The changes we made in 2017 stopped people from transferring their pensions abroad to avoid UK tax. That was a consideration, but it was not the primary motivation. Our primary motive was to do this as part of a wider move towards consistency and fairness in pensions and taxation. The Government recognise that
those in receipt of foreign pensions do face additional costs in accessing their pension. That was the original motivation behind the 90% rate that was introduced, I believe, in the 1970s. However, we have taken the view that it is not for Government to compensate these individuals for their choice to work outside the UK or to enable them to use this as a UK tax break. It is the Government’s role to encourage a fair and sustainable tax regime in the UK. The changes that we made have equalised the system, from which only overseas-based employees were previously able to benefit.

I again thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I also thank his constituents and others who may be paying attention to this debate for the ground-breaking work that they have done at CERN, which the Government and, I think, all Members are rightly proud of. We are proud that UK citizens have played a part in that and that they have chosen to return home to the UK for their well-earned retirement. The Government are delighted to welcome home British expatriates who have worked abroad to spend their retirement in places such as Poole. We recognise that that plays an increasingly important part in our economy.

I hope that my hon. Friend’s constituents will appreciate the Government’s rationale for making these changes over the past few years. We took a decision to treat all UK pensions consistently. Such judgments are difficult ones, and do involve winners and losers, but we appreciate the views of his constituents, and I would be happy to meet him and them in person, if it would help to further the conversation, and to listen to their specific concerns and see what, if anything, we can do.

Sir Robert Syms: I thank the Minister for that offer. This is a complex area, and I think that my constituents would be grateful for at least a brief meeting just to go through some of their concerns, outside the public spotlight.

Robert Jenrick: I thank my hon. Friend. This is a complicated area. I hope that my comments today have provided some answers to him and his constituents, but of course I would be happy to meet him and to bring along Treasury officials, who might be able to shed further light on this matter and answer their questions in greater detail. They are understandable and important questions, because they concern the financial security his constituents can enjoy in later life.

I hope that this evening’s debate has provided some answers and that the meeting that follows will provide more. We believe that the previous approach was fair. It was driven by a desire for consistency and fairness for all British pensioners, and we hope that right hon. and hon. Members can support that as a principle. Once again, I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter.

Question put and agreed to.

5.20 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Friday 16 March 2018

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

9.34 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163).

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Speaker: Will the Serjeant at Arms please investigate the delay in the Aye Lobby, which I have reason to believe is not heavily populated?

The House divided: Ayes 1, Noes 114.

Division No. 132] [9.34 am

AYES

Fitzpatrick, Jim

Tellers for the Ayes:

Will Quince and Michael Tomlinson

NOES

Argar, Edward
Bardell, Hannah
Bebb, Guto
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blomfield, Paul
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Brock, Deidre
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Cadbury, Ruth
De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dinenage, Caroline
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Donelan, Michelle
Dowden, Oliver
Duffield, Rosie
Edwards, Jonathan
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Mark
Fletcher, Colleen
Foster, Kevin
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frer, Mike
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Chris
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Harris, Carolyn
Harris, Rebecca
Hayman, Sue
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hendy, Drew
Hollnbone, Mr Philip
Hosie, Stewart
Huddleston, Nigel
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Kerr, Stephen
Khan, Afzal
Law, Chris
Lopresti, Jack
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Malthouse, Kit
Martin, Sandy
Maynard, Paul
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm

De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dinenage, Caroline
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Donelan, Michelle
Dowden, Oliver
Duffield, Rosie
Edwards, Jonathan
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Mark
Fletcher, Colleen
Foster, Kevin
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frer, Mike
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Chris
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Harris, Carolyn
Harris, Rebecca
Hayman, Sue
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hendy, Drew
Hollnbone, Mr Philip
Hosie, Stewart
Huddleston, Nigel
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Kerr, Stephen
Khan, Afzal
Law, Chris
Lopresti, Jack
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Malthouse, Kit
Martin, Sandy
Maynard, Paul
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm

McDonald, Stuart C.
Merriman, Huw
Milling, Amanda
Monaghan, Carol
Morris, David
Morton, Wendy
Nandy,Lisa
Neill, Robert
Newlands, Gavin
Nokes, rh Caroline
O’Hara, Brendan
Owen, Albert
Pennycook, Matthew
Philip, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Pow, Rebecca
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Reeves, Ellie
Robinson, Mary
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shelbrooke, Alec
Sheppard, Tommy
Smith, Cat
Sobel, Alex
Soubry, rh Anna
Stephens, Chris
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevens, Jo
Sunak, Rishi
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Timms, rh Stephen
Warburton, David
West, Catherine
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Dr Paul
Yasin, Mohammad

Tellers for the Noes:

David Linden and Neil Gray

Question accordingly negatived.
Angus Brendan MacNeil: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I found out the other day from the House of Commons Library that there is a shortage of welders in the United Kingdom. I can see the puzzlement on your face already, Mr Speaker, as to where I am going with welders in relation to family reunion, but please bear with me—as I am sure you will. I mention this because I met an apprentice welder the other day, a 19-year-old who lives in Canterbury in Kent, a place described as the garden of England. Canterbury is a beautiful, historical town; I once visited it, and I can attest to that.

Our welding apprentice is doing very well in college; he is working at level 2 and spends a day a week in Dover with a welding company. He is a focused young man; he is motivated and is looking forward to the future. He is an asset to the community and a help to his neighbours, a burden on no one; he is polite, he is funny. This welding apprentice is also multilingual; he speaks four languages, and efficiently. I am not sure if that is the norm for welders, but I know cousins of mine who are welders who can speak at least two languages, and bilingual welders seems to the norm in my constituency. This individual is certainly doing better than that, however. He has a great future ahead of him, especially as the average age of welders in the UK is 55 and EngineeringUK says the UK has a chronic shortage of skills in engineering, particularly welding.

This young man has a fascinating backstory. Yohannes’ journey to Canterbury was a long one, as before he moved to Canterbury and became a welder he was a refugee. He escaped Eritrea at the age of 16 to avoid conscription to the brutal military, which could have no time limits, and after going to Sudan where he spent a while with his uncle, he moved through the Sahara—a fortnight in a lorry and a fortnight in a pick-up—to Tripoli in Libya. He told me that the pick-up was so tightly packed that if anybody fell out, the danger was they would be left behind by the people-smugglers—and the prognosis for those left behind in the Sahara desert would not be great. On that journey in the desert the authority were the people-traffickers with the guns, and he said some bad things happened to girls; I will leave that there.

From Tripoli he boarded a boat—a jalba as he called it in one of his languages. One of the four languages he speaks is obviously English, and he is also fluent in Arabic, Aramaic and his native Tigrinya, and jalba is the Eritrean word for boat. They sailed for two days from Libya before being picked up by a bigger boat—a mercab, the Tigrinya word for a larger ship, in this case an Italian naval ship, which, happily, took them to Italy. One of the benefits of speaking to Yohannes is that at least I have picked up two words of another language. Everybody was very happy when they arrived in Italy after crossing the Sahara and the Mediterranean. They were taken to a reception centre and given plenty of food. That was the first part of his journey.

From the reception centre he travelled to Rome and spent two weeks living at a railway station before moving through France to the famous Calais jungle, where he lived with other Eritreans for a while. He told me that in the jungle there could be tensions between different communities: Eritreans in one place, Syrians in another, and whoever else in another group. Obviously, people were quite stressed in such a situation.

Lisa Nandy: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for the story he is telling about this remarkable young man. It reminds me very much of a young woman I worked with at the Children’s Society nearly a decade ago, who was separated from her mother on a journey here, and whose mother, sadly, died before she could see her again. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that these incredible young people deserve so much better than these avoidable rules that cause so much human misery, and will he urge other Members when they think about how they are going to vote today to think of those young people and do the right thing?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, which succinctly sums up what I have to say in a rather long speech. I suspect a number of Members will want to make interventions, and that is welcome, because testaments and points like those the hon. Lady has made are very welcome.

Eventually, Yohannes made it across the English channel in the back of a refrigerated lorry. Things were fine until somebody switched off the refrigeration system; being a tight, insulated space with 24 people in it, it became very hot. One of them had a mobile phone and eventually contacted the emergency services. They did not know where they were, but the phone’s GPS system located them.

At that time—in December 2016—they made the news. Luckily, none of them were in any way badly medically affected by the experience. They were taken to a reception centre in Kent, before Yohannes found his way to Canterbury, where he lived in communal accommodation with other refugees. Over time in Canterbury some people who had volunteered to help at a refugee charity got to know Yohannes, and he lives with one of them at the moment.

It seems that Canterbury is quite the place. It is not the stereotype we are given to believe by many in the newspapers, of people struggling and complaining about migrants and refugees. In Canterbury, people seem to be very welcome. There is a big Eritrean community in Canterbury, which of course Yohannes gravitated towards. Canterbury can be proud of the way it has treated and looked after refugees.

Stephen Gethins: My hon. Friend is making an exceptionally powerful and compelling speech. Does he agree that his friend Yohannes is one in a long line of refugees from places including Germany, Hungary and Iraq who have made a significant economic and other contribution to society across the UK?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: That is absolutely correct, and I am making this speech because, unfortunately, some people look at this issue in terms of pounds, shillings and pence. We should look first at the humanity, but certainly in terms of pounds, shillings and pence, we
should note that Yohannes, at 19, with his drive and ambition, is certainly going to achieve an awful lot more than he already has.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that we should focus on our common humanity? In January, I presented a petition from two of my primary schools, St Patrick’s and Symington. Their pupils had done a project putting themselves in the position of child refugees. They had drawn little suitcases with what they would take—what was most precious to them. What struck me was that in every suitcase was a photograph of their family. We should be doing the same as that, and if we are a bit too old to imagine ourselves as children, we should imagine the help and support we would wish someone to give our children if they were in this circumstance.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My hon. Friend makes a compelling point. We could think about our children and grandchildren, and we can look back at our own history. My background is highlands Scottish and Irish, and in the last century highlands Scots and Irish were certainly in need of help from many people as they were pushed and moved across areas of the world.

I was talking about Canterbury and saying it can be proud: the people of Canterbury can hold their heads up high.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): I just want to thank the hon. Gentleman for mentioning my fantastic constituency and all the wonderful refugee charities that are there.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Lady is very welcome, and she is welcome, too, to intervene again if I make any further mention of Canterbury.

I was also given a blog from one corner of the United Kingdom that highlights the experience of refugees in the UK, including Northern Ireland, and other places. When we get beyond the headlines and down into people’s experience, as my hon. Friend for North Ayrshire—

Dr Whitford: Central Ayrshire.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am sorry that I cannot pronounce Central Ayrshire, but in my own constituency of Na h-Eileanan an Iar—

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Certainly.

Anna Soubry: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on both his Bill and his powerful speech. Does he agree that the key word here is “refugee”? Everybody forgets what and who a refugee is; this is somebody who is fleeing a place they love—their home. They do not want to leave it, but circumstances, that we cannot even begin to imagine, mean they literally grasp the first things that come to hand and flee their home looking for a place of refuge.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The right hon. Lady is absolutely correct. Later I will quote from a speech that my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) made on 22 February, in which he made exactly that point. We must remember why people become refugees and travel here. I thank the right hon. Lady for her support, along with the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), who I think is a distant cousin—I do not want to land him in any more trouble.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has brought forward this Bill, which follows the Bill introduced in the other place by my noble Friend Baroness Hamwee. If the Government tell us today that the Bill would provide a pull factor, we should vote against them for that reason alone, because the reality, as the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said, is that people become refugees because of the push factor. We have to support these people, who are fleeing appalling conditions.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I have seen a blog post from the Government, under the headline “Bill to reunite refugees with families will make their lives harder”, which is Orwellian doublespeak of the worst kind. Hopefully the Government will think again about the words they have chosen. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) made that point well when she talked about the photograph.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this important Bill. Governments are often constrained by the need to make these reunions and to having more immigrants, but the reality is that once they know the details of the circumstances those individuals are fleeing, their attitude towards them becomes very positive. There are many examples of the public in Liverpool rallying around refugees when there are threats to remove them.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I thank the hon. Lady for making that stellar point. She is absolutely correct. We know that from our own experience here, because often we change our minds when we start to understand a little more. The public do the same as their representatives.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman—my fellow bilingual island MP—on bringing forward the Bill. He used the powerful word “motivation” in his opening remarks. When we see refugees without their families, either in camps or processing centres, we can see the loneliness etched on their faces. When we see them together as a family unit, we see why they are motivated and why they contribute so positively to our communities.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. While I was listening to Yohannes’ story on Wednesday, I was certain that I would not have had the motivation at age 19, or probably at any age, to cross the Sahara over four weeks, on two different forms of transport, and then to cross the Mediterranean in uncertain circumstances. That was his first time on a boat. I can recall my first time on a boat, and it was certainly not a pleasant experience.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Will my honourable cousin give way?
Angus Brendan MacNeil: Nepotism looms large in this place.

Robert Neill: There is compelling evidence that diasporas enrich all parts of countries, and indeed Chambers. Probably every Member of this House has had the good fortune to go to a higher education institution, including some very distinguished ones, and every one of those, in every part of the UK, has at some point or other been enriched by academics who arrived in this country as refugees, whether fleeing the Nazis, communism or other regimes. We should remember the contribution that they have made, from which all of us have benefited, directly or indirectly.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My honourable cousin makes a fantastic point. We have to see this in multi-dimensions, because seeing somebody as just a refugee in the here and now, so not as an academic or a welder, will lead us down a narrow and sterile path.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing forward the Bill. He mentioned the connection between his constituency and Ireland, and our families share a similar history. He talked about the lessons to be learnt from the experience of the community in Canterbury, which is shared by that of West Dunbartonshire, where over the past two and a half years we have accepted 40 refugee families, who are adding to the diversity, the economy and the long-term sustainability of the entire UK. This is a positive thing and Government Members should vote for it.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I absolutely agree. Also, I can assure the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) that mention of Canterbury by Scottish National party Members is in no way politically aggressive.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Bill has widespread support in our communities across the United Kingdom. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the inspirational young people of the rights respecting group at Hermitage Academy in Helensburgh, who have been campaigning on this issue for months? Their petition has now been signed by 1,100 people in the town. When they deliver the petition to Parliament, which they will do soon, will he join me in welcoming them?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: It would be a privilege to meet the young people of Hermitage Academy, because what they have done will help inform our thinking here.

Yohannes is getting on with life in Canterbury. He has a good group of friends and he supports Manchester United—I will leave that there, given that he does not support the mighty Glasgow Celtic. In Na h-Eileanan an Iar—moving from Canterbury to somewhere that is easier to pronounce—we are fortunate enough to have a young man called Anas, who is 17 and from Syria. He has written a blog that has come to my attention. I think it is worth giving voice to what he has written:

“From the time when I have been told I have to travel to Stornoway, the first thing that came to my mind was “where is that?” Then they told me it is in Scotland. Well, all I know about Scotland is that it is a part of the UK and it is so cold there”—

He comes from Syria, so he probably does find it cold. He continues:

“I didn’t even think that Stornoway is on an island in the middle of the Atlantic!

Lots of things started coming to me, bad ideas, about how the people will be there, what the houses look like and even how the people look. For me it was an unknown place. I wasn’t worried about the language—I already have some English and it will improve by practising with the people.”

Given what he has written, I think his English is very good. He goes on:

“The most important thing I was thinking about is how people will deal with me with my family, especially the women in my family, because they wear the Hijab and it is something strange for the people where I am going to.

What I thought about people here is that everyone will just be looking after himself, and nobody cares about the rest. I was completely wrong. Now I have to say sorry to them about how I was thinking about them before.

The thing that surprised me most is the charity shops and events, and even the small shops have at least one box for charity. People here deal with volunteering as part of their duties. For a while I thought they got paid for that, but all I know is that it is a priority for them! I asked myself how they do this, and the only answer I got is that they feel for each other, and they love to do things for others just for ‘thank you.’

In general, I like it here. It is an island in the middle of the sea, but at least you can feel the life here. You can be like anyone here. What do you need more when an old man asking you, ‘Where are you from?’ And after you answer he starts telling you, ‘You are very welcome in my city. We are so sorry about what’s happening there. What can I do for you? Please ask for help when you need it.’ Unfortunately, I didn’t realise that before.

The rule they follow is, ‘humanity first.’”

We see that in Canterbury, Liverpool, Argyll, Central Ayrshire and a number of other places.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I commend my hon. Friend for bringing forward the Bill, and for the way he is introducing it. I am incredibly proud that in my constituency we have been able to welcome a number of refugee families from Syria. Can he provide some reassurance to those who have had to flee violence from close family members that the Bill will not have an impact on their safety?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Absolutely. The Bill would enable refugees here to sponsor their family members. They would be the actors and they would choose who would come.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I think that the way the hon. Gentleman has brought the element of humanity into this debate is very important. I listened to the words of his constituent about how he felt in anticipation of his first visit to Stornoway. I have to say that the first time I visited Stornoway I felt much the same, and for the most part my misgivings were ill-founded. The stories that we are hearing from different parts of the country—I have had similar experiences in my constituency—should surely give some succour to those Members who are thinking about supporting the Bill but are perhaps concerned about how that will be seen. There is a positive political advantage for those who are prepared to support the Bill, so nobody should be afraid of it.
Angus Brendan MacNeil: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct about that, and I hope we see him in Stornoway sooner rather than later.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his work on this Bill, but I would not want him to leave Carmarthenshire out of his list. Will he join me in congratulating the Plaid Cymru-run Carmarthenshire County Council—the council in Wales that has rehoused the largest number of refugees by a country mile in our country?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am pleased to join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Carmarthenshire’s council, which brings me neatly on to Aberdeenshire Council, as I was going to mention that, too. Apparently, a lot of Syrians are watching this debate in Aberdeenshire today, so let me say hello to them. I am told they are watching this on Facebook, with their hearts in their mouths. Aberdeenshire Council needs to be congratulated, because, on a cross-party basis, its councillors have unanimously and publicly given their support to this Bill. So I thank the Tory, Labour, Liberal, Green, Independent and SNP councillors of Aberdeenshire Council, who have all united today to support the legislation.

The thing about this Bill is that it could have been introduced by any Member in this House. It was conceived by a partnership of good samaritan organisations: the British Red Cross, Oxfam, the Refugee Council, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Amnesty International, to name but some. The Bill has the support of MPs from seven political parties: the Conservatives, Labour, the SNP, the Democratic Unionist party, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Green party. I thank hon. Members from across the House who have co-sponsored the Bill.

This Bill should not be about party politics or about red, blue, yellow and so on; it is about compassion and, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said a few moments ago, humanity.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): First, let me say that I enjoy a sail to Stornoway. May I also say that this debate comes 46 years after my wife and I took a refugee family into our house? This past week our family and theirs had a lovely get together. What I have not yet heard from the hon. Gentleman, Gentleman, or from the good samaritan organisations, is the number of people who would be eligible under the Bill who are not already eligible.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman asks a good question. From the information I have directly, I can tell him that a number of years ago we would have been talking about 400, but with the increase in refugees the number who would be helped is probably between 800 and 1,000 at the moment. It is not a huge number. I commend him for what he has done to help refugees in the past. He sees the benefits of that today in his personal life, and there are a number of similar examples of that from across the world.

This Bill merely takes the UK into line with the rest of Europe. If I have any criticism of what I am trying to achieve, it is that my Bill is so small and unspectacular—so much so that we should have no problem in passing it.

Someone would have to have a very hard heart or an empathy bypass not to want to ensure that the limited measures I ask for today become law. May I say how grateful I am for the support of people who have done well in life yet have made it their concern and business to use their position to help the least well-off in the world? Some are celebrities—actors and actresses, and pop stars—who have used their position to highlight this Bill and given their time very freely.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the support he has gathered for his Bill and on the powerful speech he is making. He talks about those supporting others who are vulnerable in our community. A refugee family in my constituency have come to Livingston, made it their home and set up a business, which reclaims leather sofas and turns them into shoes and bags, and is now supporting and employing disabled people in the West Lothian and Livingston area. These are exactly the kind of people we want to welcome to our communities—those who come and make the fabric of our society richer.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Absolutely. This is also a loss for the host countries from which these people have had to flee, often in the most desperate of circumstances.

As well as pop stars and celebrities, it is mostly decent members of the public who have been writing to us, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) pointed out. They can conceive of the enormity of what refugees, or people fleeing to safety, have had to go through, and in their droves they have been very supportive.

Often as Members of Parliament, we have to consider issues that require us to put ourselves in the shoes of those whose experiences are dissimilar to our own, which puts our ability to empathise to great test. At first glance, the subject of the Bill may seem as though it is going to ask us to go to similar lengths. How can we, sitting here in this old royal palace in the heart of London, begin to know what it is like to be a refugee who has fled the guns of Assad, crossed dangerous seas with their life in the hands of unscrupulous smugglers and then faced a gruelling, adversarial asylum system? How can we know what it is like to be a 17-year-old from Eritrea who has escaped his homeland because he did not want to be forcibly conscripted, definitely, into the army? I do not know, but I know that I do not want to know and I certainly do not want many other people to know in future.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I am here to support the hon. Gentleman’s Bill wholeheartedly, on behalf of many of my constituents—of all political persuasions—in Cardiff Central, a city of sanctuary, who have written to me about it. I do not have any concerns about the Bill, but if any Members do, I hope they will leave them until Committee and support the Bill today.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Lady makes a fantastic point. It is to Committee that people should take their concerns, because the concerns will be minor. If concerns are in any way major, they will be able to be addressed properly in Committee.
Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making many valid points. Like everybody in this House, I have been lobbied on this Bill by constituents—both for and against. It is important that we keep the right tone here; accusing people of an “empathy bypass” because they have a different understanding or different belief about the best way of helping people is probably something we can avoid in this debate. If we do that, we will have a great degree of support for the end goals.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Let us hope we see that support coming to fruition, and I look forward to seeing the hon. Gentleman with us in the Lobby at some stage today—we would be grateful for that. There can indeed be many ways of approaching things and perhaps all of us need to learn a bit more about the subject, in all manner of ways. But it is very difficult to be arguing against enabling people to leave a refugee camp to join family and relatives.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing this Bill. Does he agree that as one of the wealthiest countries, we have the capacity to support these people, who are in desperate need, and that what we lack is the political will? That will was demonstrated so well by my predecessor Lord Alf Dubs, who secured the amendment that forced the Government to allow 3,000 unaccompanied child refugees in.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct about that. Sometimes our thinking is limited and we think, “Whoah—3,000 people seems like a lot! If they were all in my front room, what would that all mean?” In a country of 65 million people, this is a drop in the ocean. Given the skills shortages we have and some of the people we could be taking in, it is in our interests to do exactly this. That is especially true at a time when there are more refugees in the world than at any point since the end of the second world war. How can we comprehend their lives, stories and tragedies, and make sense collectively of all those statistics? This is hard to fathom when we start to think of numbers like 3,000.

But today’s Bill is not principally about refugees. It is certainly not about immigration, and in a way it is not even about the war in Syria or human rights abuses in Eritrea. First and foremost, it is about family—something that each and every one of us will recognise. As my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire said, this is about the photograph in the suitcase that the children thought they would want to bring with them if they were refugees. No matter how families argue, fight and disagree with one another, they belong together. They should certainly not be forced to part. This is not an immigration issue; it is a protection issue, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West said in a debate in Westminster Hall on 22 February.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing this Bill. I absolutely support it, as I represent a community that has many, many refugees. Many of us have listened over the years to the holocaust memorial events and heard the stories of the elderly people, as they are now, who came over on the Kindertransport and so on. We have heard the stories of those who survived without their families and how traumatic that was. I am sure the hon. Gentleman has heard, as I have, the stories of those who were able to be connected with their families or some family members after the war and how much of a difference that made. How can one not link those two sets of stories?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct. When we look at history with the benefit of hindsight, we think, “Why didn’t we do more at the time?” There is a little nervousness at the moment of doing, but when it is done people are eternally grateful—and it is not just about those who have been saved: those who have done the saving can look at themselves in the mirror with a lot more pride than they otherwise could.

The Bill is about families who have been torn apart by war and persecution and who long to be reunited but cannot be because of the current rules. It is about families who face the invidious decision of whether to stay separated or to undertake potentially dangerous journeys across land, desert and sea to be together again. Nobody would want female members of their family to be tempted to cross the Sahara with people traffickers.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): UNICEF reports that a majority of unaccompanied child migrants have been subjected to sexual abuse on their journey to the UK. We have an obligation as a country to support young people who are going through the most appalling times.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. There is a judgment call about how much we talk about that: it happens, but for many people watching the debate it might be a bit too close to home. As legislators, we have to bear that in mind when we make decisions about refugees. Currently, adults who have been recognised as refugees in the UK are able to sponsor their spouse or partner, as well as children under the age of 18, to join them in the UK. We have to thank successive Governments for that, because it is a good thing. We are not here just to say what the Government are not doing, because they are doing a lot—but that is only one side of the coin. By the very nature of their being close relatives of refugees, those family members often live in extremely dangerous circumstances. We are looking to address the other side of the coin so that under-18s can sponsor and bring in family members as over-18s can. We want to get families together in both directions.

In recent weeks, the British Red Cross has helped to reunite two Syrian couples. The wives had been living in Afrin. Imagine the moment of elation when the loved ones were finally reunited in the UK; just hours before, they had been separated by thousands of miles and hundreds of bombs. Refugee family reunion is truly life-changing, which is why so many refugees and people who have moved to this country—welders or whatever—are watching this debate, because the Bill would change their lives.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that legal aid is not available for refugee family reunion cases? When the
changes were made to legal aid, it was anticipated that there would be around £450 million of savings. In 2016, there were actually £950 million of savings. Could some of that half a billion be used for these cases?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Lady makes a good argument about the pounds, shillings and pence that will inevitably come up. She has dealt with that very well.

I am aware that quite a lot of Members wish to speak and that I have not made an awful lot of progress in the past 25 minutes because I have taken a number of interventions. If Members wish to intervene, I appeal to them to think about it and to do so sparingly, as there will be other speakers on whom to intervene. We want to make progress on this Bill and get on to the Bills of other Members.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I might be a long-lost relative from Somerset, connected somehow, Mr Speaker.

Is it not right that the Lord Chancellor is undertaking a review of legal aid reforms that will include legal aid for immigration cases? The Government are already taking that on board and these matters could well be included in that review.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Legal aid is already available in Scotland. I am glad to hear what the hon. Lady says, but the approaches are not mutually exclusive. If she welcome she review, she should certainly welcome the Bill. I will personally escort her through the Lobby later, if need be.

The Bill would allow loved ones to be together, and clause 1 does just that. It asks that a statement of changes to the immigration rules be laid before both Houses, setting out the rules for refugee family reunion. In responses to debates on family reunion in both this Chamber and the Lords, Ministers have expressed their belief that the immigration rules are the best place for these provisions, rather than primary legislation. The Bill acknowledges that, which is why it operates in this way. The Minister may say that I am still attempting to use primary legislation to amend the rules, but as she is aware, there is no other way for a non-Minister to effect a change to those rules. If, however, the Minister would like to intervene to say that the Bill is unnecessary and that those sitting on the Treasury Bench plan to bring forward a statement of changes to reflect its provisions, I will gladly give way.

Clause 1 sets out the relationships that would be covered by refugee family reunion. It includes those who already have a right and expands that in several important ways. There is a very long list of relationships that I could have put in the Bill. Right hon. and hon. Members could probably spend the entire debate thinking of distant relatives who, had we been forced to leave our homes and communities because of a vicious, deadly conflict, we would like to think we could bring with us to safety, but I have focused on some of the most egregious examples that are not covered by the existing rules.

As I explained earlier, under the existing rules, a parent who has been recognised as a refugee in the UK can sponsor their children under the age of 18 to join them, but if their child has turned 18, they are not automatically eligible. Muhammed is a former lawyer from Syria. He arrived in the UK and was recognised as a refugee after applying for asylum. He immediately began the process of applying for family reunion so that his wife Amal and their children could live with him in the United Kingdom. Devastatingly, the family were forced to leave behind their two eldest children, a son and a daughter, because they were over 18. Muhammed told the British Red Cross:

“We are a very close family; our bonds are very special...My little kids ask me every day: ‘Baba, what happened with Kusai and Athar? When will they join us? When will we see them and talk to them?’ I truly have no idea and don’t know what to tell them.”

The Minister may argue that the Government have recognised that children in such circumstances should be eligible, and point to the family reunion guidance that was updated in summer 2016. That guidance provided clearer direction to Home Office caseworkers on the types of cases in which family reunion may be granted in exceptional circumstances. At the top of the list are cases in which children over the age of 18 are still dependent on their parents. Despite those changes, though, we learned last year that in the first nine months of 2017, only 49 people were granted family reunion in exceptional circumstances. My Bill would move that group of children into the main body of the rules. If the Government accept the principle that such children should be eligible to be reunited, as they do in the guidance, I hope that they will support at least that element of the Bill.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his Bill, which I support wholeheartedly. He reminds me of a story that Oxfam told me about a gentleman called Tarek, whose son Kawa was left behind in Turkey while the entire family was resettled here in the UK. Kawa was the main breadwinner of that family. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it will be helpful to the integration of the families into UK society if we bring their children home?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Absolutely. Everybody will be a winner if the unnecessary bureaucracy that has been created around this issue is removed, or at least redesigned to help people rather than hinder them. The hon. Lady makes a good point.

I hope that the Government can at least support the provisions on dependent children, because bringing such young people firmly within the rules would have a number of benefits. First, it would give those families that apply to be reunited more certainty that they are eligible. There is no separate family reunion application to be reunited outside of the rules, only the main refugee family application form. The family then has to rely on caseworkers seeing that there are exceptional circumstances and applying their discretion.

For those families who are able to reunite under the discretionary element of the rules, there are further problems when the family member arrives in the UK. Under the main family reunion rules, family members who come to the UK get the same type of leave as the relative they are joining. That means that they are granted five years’ leave to stay in the UK and are then able to access support to help the family to rebuild their lives together, including to ensure that they have suitable housing and enough financial assistance to help them to integrate into their new homes.
[Angus Brendan MacNeil]

Family members reunited outside the rules do not get the same type of leave. They will usually be granted 33 months’ leave to stay and may be subject to restrictions to which someone with refugee status is not, including their not having recourse to public funds.

They face a longer path to resettlement than the family members they are joining. Without support, they can find themselves living in overcrowded accommodation or experiencing homelessness. Therefore, after having quite a traumatic back story, they can find that their current story can be quite difficult as well.

The Bill would allow refugee children to sponsor their closest family members to join them. The UK is one of only two countries in the EU that does not allow children who have been recognised as refugees to have any family reunion rights. That is the crux of the matter, and it is something that we have to change. That is a small piece of what the Bill does. As I said earlier, no, we are not doing enough, but at least we are doing that.

While most countries in the EU are signed up to the family reunion directive, which expressly grants separated children family reunion rights, the UK, along with Denmark and Ireland, did not opt into that directive. However, Ireland amended domestic legislation to allow children to be reunited with their parents and siblings; the UK did not. As a result, the children whom the UK Government recognise as being in need of international protection, accepting that it is unsafe for them to return home, are kept apart from their parents. Young boys and girls, many of whom will have faced untold horrors after fleeing their homes, are left without those who are best placed to support them.

Sir Edward Davey: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point about how other European countries regard this problem. I think that he is saying that every other European country bar Denmark believes that a child refugee should have the right to have their family come and join them in that country. Any argument that the Government make today is an argument that is not accepted in Germany, in France, in Spain, in Italy and in every other European country. Why should the argument be different for the UK?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Some people feel—it is an excuse, actually—that the Bill, if passed, would encourage people to send their children first. I will deal with that point later, but if that was true, it would be happening in all those other countries. Therefore, it is not true at all. Some also throw up the legal aid argument. Legal aid is available in Scotland, so if legal aid was the point, all the refugees of England and Wales would be going to Scotland. People settle in a place for a whole variety of personal or community reasons. Therefore, these things are not primary pushers, but would help refugees in places where they settle, and help all those around them as well.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his important speech. Is he aware that this issue is cited in some areas as the reason why Italy and Greece are not placing children and child refugees in the UK as part of the Dubs amendment? Those countries are concerned that while the children would be able to be reunited with their family in any other country in Europe, that would not be possible in the United Kingdom. Some 240 places offered by local authorities are empty as a result, and we are not filling those Dubs places because there is such a gap between the UK’s position and that of the rest of Europe.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention; I was not aware of that point. It is absolutely fascinating to hear that other countries choose not to send these children to the UK. If they are doing so out of common decency and in the best interests of those children, because they know that they cannot be reunited with their families, that makes it even more imperative that the UK plays its international role so that people in Greece and Italy can look to the UK as being as good as any other country. Surely, as the legislators of the principal UK Parliament, we should be changing the law to make sure that that happens.

One of the children affected by the rules is Tesfa, who grew up in Eritrea. As he got older, he feared being forced into Eritrea’s brutal and endless military service. In 2010, his brother was taken by soldiers, and the family never heard from him again. Then, when Tesfa was 16, soldiers came to his school; Tesfa never returned home. Without telling his family, he fled Eritrea. He did not know where he planned to go—this is the point about legal aid or whatever—but he had to keep moving. He passed through Sudan and Libya, went over the Mediterranean, and found himself, eventually, in the United Kingdom. After applying for asylum, he was recognised as a refugee, and eventually—after well over a year—he was able to speak to his mother. Imagine that at the age of 16. However, he was unable to be reunited with his family in Britain. The UK has offered him a new home, but what home can a young man have without his family? Amnesty, which is compiling a report on this, told me that one refugee said, “A refugee without a family is like a body without a soul.” That quote will be in the Amnesty report—a plug for Amnesty there.

The Government have previously asserted that allowing children to sponsor their family members to join them would result in families sending their children to the UK so that they could then act as sponsors. During a debate on family reunion in the House of Lords before Christmas, numerous peers rose to take on this argument—I congratulate them on doing so. They cited what Mr Justice McCloskey stated in the upper tribunal:

“there is no evidence underlying it”,

with

“‘it’ being the pull factor”.—[Official Report, House of Lords, 15 December 2017; Vol. 787, c. 1777-78.]

Lord Kerr of Kinlochard, who is better known for drafting article 50, was one of those peers who forcefully took on the Government’s argument. He described as a “strange, sick, Swiftian joke” the Government’s implication that families in countries such as Syria, Libya, Eritrea or the Sudan would sit down together and make the cold calculation that they would send a child on a journey across land and sea that might take several years, putting their lives at risk, to secure a right to bring the rest of the family to join them. It is very difficult to disagree with the noble Lord about that.
The Government have recognised these children as refugees. They must be congratulated on that, but they must take it further. There is no special definition of refugee that a child has to meet that is different from that for an adult. Children have to pass the same test. If they are recognised as refugees, it is because they have a need for international protection. It is therefore surely only right that these children are able to be with their family members, as adult refugees would be, which would correct a situation that the Home Affairs Committee has described as “perverse”.

On the other side of the coin, the Bill would allow refugee children to sponsor their parents and unmarried siblings under the age of 25 to join them. I can already guess what the reply to that point in the Minister’s brief will be, but I urge her not to read it. I urge her not to assert that parents would callously send their children on life-threatening journeys just so that they could later join them. If that were true, they would be going to other countries anyway, but that is not happening. I urge her instead to recognise that children are better off with their parents and those who will support them, and to bring the UK into line with the vast majority of the rest of Europe so that people resettling refugees in Greece and Italy can have trust and faith in the United Kingdom.

I do not want to pre-empt the Minister too much, but she might well argue that provisions elsewhere in the immigration rules allow a wider group of family members to be reunited. She might say that they are to be found in part 8 and appendix FM of the immigration rules, meaning that the Bill is not needed. However, as she is aware, those routes do not cover all the family relationships that I have described and nor are they accessible for refugees. The application alone costs several hundred pounds, and family members in the UK must show that they can financially support their relative. For refugees, who often have very few resources after escaping with what they have on their backs, those barriers will be impossible to overcome.

Clause 1 also gives the Home Secretary a discretionary power to grant family reunion applications in circumstances over and above those that I have just described. It may be that such an action is in the best interests of a child, because a family member is living in precarious circumstances, be that as a result of an emotional, psychological, physical or financial dependency, or as she may otherwise see fit.

I take this opportunity to thank the refugee team at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, which emailed me the other afternoon to say:

“Our NHS Trust supports the mental health of young refugees through our child and adolescent mental health service. The refugee team here, with the support of Chief Executive Paul Jenkins, wished to convey their support for your private Member's Bill.”

I thank all those working at the sharp end with refugees who have taken the time in their busy lives to be aware of what is going on in Parliament and to write an email of support.

Family reunion is primarily about bringing families back together, but it should also be seen as a safe and legal route for refugees to escape dangerous circumstances. Last month, the Home Secretary celebrated the fact that the UK had reached the halfway point in resettling 20,000 refugees from the Syrian conflict. That is to be commended. Family reunion should act as a complement to that and the UK’s other resettlement programmes.

Although for the purposes of family reunion it is only the relative in the UK who needs to have been officially recognised as a refugee, the Home Office’s immigration statistics show that the beneficiaries of family reunion are often the most vulnerable. In 2017, most family reunion visas were issued to people from Eritrea, Iran, Sudan and Syria. Some 95% of those who came to the UK were under the age of 18 and/or female. Despite the global refugee crisis—the worst since world war two—very few refugees ever find themselves in the UK. Indeed, in recent years, the number of people applying for asylum in the UK has fallen. Some 86% of refugees live in the world’s poorest countries, not the richest ones. Expanding the refugee family rules would mean that more refugees are able to find safety in the UK to our benefit, as well as theirs.

While it is all well and good for families to have a right to family reunion, it is worthless if they are unable to access that right. This is what clause 2 of my Bill is about. It would amend the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 to make civil legal aid available for family reunion applications. Prior to the passing of that Act, legal assistance had been available. With its removal, even those families who are eligible to be reunited face significant hurdles in being able to navigate the process.

The British Red Cross set out in its report “Not So Straightforward” the many bureaucratic and practical barriers that families face. At a recent event in Parliament hosted by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, MPs heard at first hand about the impact that not having legal aid can have. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will remember Sarah Foster, a caseworker at the British Red Cross, who said that a good solicitor for a family reunion application would cost at least £500. Meeting such costs can prove near impossible for refugees who have been unable to work while awaiting a decision on their asylum application. Sarah told us that families resort to borrowing from friends, taking out loans from unscrupulous lenders or living on virtually nothing to afford the support that they need to make their family reunion application viable.

As I am sure the hon. Gentleman will also remember, Sarah told us of one applicant she met in a supermarket. He had been recognised as a refugee, but had seven children living in destitution abroad. In his shopping basket were packets of 10p noodles, which he planned to live on for the next few weeks so that he could save up for the legal costs of applying to bring his children to safety. This is the situation that we are dealing with and that too many people are facing.

I will wind up my speech by thanking the British Red Cross, the UN Refugee Agency, the Refugee Council, Amnesty International and Oxfam for their support in helping the Bill to reach this point, and particularly the extremely brilliant help of Jon Featony. I also thank the many other charities, organisations and supporters who have been in touch; those who work every day to help refugees; Baroness Hamwee, who is working on these issues in the House of Lords; the NHS refugee team; and Reverend Steve Tinning at Leigh Road Baptist...
10.43 am

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): It is a privilege and a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)—

[Interuption.] I nailed the pronunciation. I congratulate him on bringing this Bill to the House, and commend him for his moving, persuasive and fascinating speech. I also commend him for building so much support for the Bill. This really is an important debate about an important Bill. The subject is very close to my heart and something about which many of us feel strongly.

Many Members will remember the Dubs amendment to the Immigration Act 2016 that came before the House in April that year. The Dublin regulation said that refugee families had a right to stay together and allowed refugees to join family members who were legally in another country, so that families could be reunited. On the back of that, the Dubs amendment sought to extend that provision to unaccompanied children fleeing war in Syria who were living in the Calais camp at the time and did not have any family here.

I was one of only five Conservative Members to feel sufficiently strongly to support the Dubs amendment and vote against the Government. Just three of us now remain on these Benches, including my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who is just leaving the Chamber. The pressure that was exerted at the time was enough to persuade the Government subsequently to accept the provisions. I mention all that because I want to emphasise that I have thought about this policy carefully. We all need to scrutinise it, particularly as the landscape shifts.

I am pleased that this Bill has come before the House for debate, because it is only by exploring these issues that we will, I hope, come to the right conclusions. As we do so, we need to look carefully at the background of the situation today. When we look at the UK’s reaction to the appalling humanitarian crisis in Syria, we can be rather proud of what is unquestionably an impressive record. Almost £2.5 billion in aid has been committed since 2012. That not only represents our largest ever response to a humanitarian crisis, but means that we are second only to the United States in providing support and far ahead of our European neighbours.

That support has been focused on educating refugees who have found themselves in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, as well as helping them to find jobs. These are big numbers. Over 500,000 children in Syria have been in education thanks to UK aid, and many tens of thousands are enrolled in schools in surrounding countries. When we think about refugees coming to the UK, let us remember that in 2016—at the height of the crisis in the Calais camps—the UK resettled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU state. Eurostat figures show that over a third of people resettled in the EU actually came to the UK.

In that process, the most vulnerable refugees have been supported through resettlement programmes, which offer safe and legal routes to protection, and are specifically designed to keep families together. Some 20,000 refugees from Syria will have been settled by 2020, and around half of them have already arrived here. I do not want to list endless figures, but over the past five years, nearly 25,000 family reunion visas have been issued, and some 50,000 people have been given protection status in the UK since 2010.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Will he reiterate the point about the refugees whom we are seeking to support? This country has a powerful record of supporting refugees in situ in the region, where they are most vulnerable. It is also the most vulnerable of those whom we are bringing to safety on these shores. Will he address that point?

David Warburton: Absolutely. My hon. Friend reads my mind; he has obviously been looking ahead at what I am about to say.

Under current rules, partners who are coming here must rightly show that their relationship predates their exile, that it is ongoing, and that both parties have an intent to continue their relationship here. Children must show that they are related, under 18 years old, unmarried and not living an independent life. Family reunion visas are exempt from some of the usual criteria. There is no need to demonstrate adequate finance to support dependants. Dependents do not have to demonstrate any proficiency in English, and there is no processing charge or immigration health surcharge.

When it comes to other family members—again, quite rightly—exceptions and additional compassionate circumstances can be taken into account. These kinds of exceptions could apply, for example, to help a dependent child over 18 or an unaccompanied child with a relative in the UK.

As the House will know, family reunion can also be enacted through other refugee resettlement schemes. The Mandate and the Gateway schemes offer routes for refugees living overseas to be settled in the UK where this is in their best interests. Both those schemes recognise family ties as part of this calculation. Family links are also one of the grounds for eligibility under the Syrian Vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. The children at risk scheme is also helping to resettle up to 3,000 children and their families from the middle east and the north African region over the course of this Parliament.

The key part of looking closely at this area must be to focus on how best we target our responses and our support, as my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) pointed out. If we change policy here in the UK—if we signal and signpost ourselves as a more open door—how will that influence behaviour and therefore lives? Of course, as we have heard, those facing civil war or persecution have little choice about fleeing their homeland—that is pretty clear—but what follows that? How best can we step in to support them?

Dr Whitford: If these children have been accepted as refugees, does the hon. Gentleman not see that the cost to the Government, local government and everyone else
in their future years will be less if they are part of a family and have a successful life and a successful settlement, and are not left here as orphans?

David Warburton: That is a very good point. I appreciate the hon. Lady’s intervention. Cost is not really a material matter in this. It is really about what factors will influence behaviour, and so what the result of a policy change will be.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech, a great deal of which I agree with. I recognise that the Government have done a great deal in many areas. One of the policy changes in the Bill is really quite modest: it is to make it easier for those who have fled in fear, as he said, to get around the very difficult and onerous requirements to provide documentation in order to access legal aid or exceptional case provisions. As I am sure he will know from his interest in the field, the British Red Cross found that some 74% of all family reunion cases were missing one or more documents. He will also know that someone who is genuinely fleeing in fear frequently does not have time to go through a checklist of documents they might need later. Is not that one of the reasons why this Bill, in a very modest way, improves things in the direction that he has argued for in the past?

David Warburton: There is a lot to be said for what my hon. Friend says. As he knows, exceptional compassionate circumstances do exist, and the Home Office guidance allows for those things. He is absolutely right that there are issues about this, such as timing. There are the practicalities and the logistics of the situation, which can very often mean that it is not as easy as it may seem.

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman asks the very legitimate question about what will be the impact of change. As we have heard from the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, current British policy is leading to authorities in Greece and Italy not sending children who would otherwise be eligible under the Dubs arrangements. Is the hon. Gentleman comfortable with the status quo in this regard?

David Warburton: No, I am not entirely comfortable with that. We need to look closely at how the Dubs scheme is now being run and what has happened to it since the Government accepted the amendment, because it has not necessarily been fully adopted, and councils have not taken it on in the way that they perhaps should have done.

I am not sure that secondary movements really do improve lives. There are examples that we can look at. In 2015, Germany’s asylum seeker intake increased by 155% as a result of people reacting specifically to policy change. Interestingly, more than 20% of the people who sought asylum in Germany that year were from the Balkan countries, which have been conflict-free for more than 20 years, so those people were not seeking refuge—they were seeking opportunity.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Just to be clear, what we are doing is putting under-18s in the same category as over-18s. They are already here and we are just giving them the right to family life. If we ask the refugees who are watching us today, they will say that that is what they want. They are people like us and that is what they want to make their lives better. Some would argue that under-18s need their family even more than over-18s. We give this right to the over-18s, and we should give it to the under-18s who are here.

David Warburton: As I am sure no one would disagree, it would only be in the interests of people traffickers—for children to be encouraged to leave their families and undertake perilous, difficult, dangerous journeys in the hope that their relatives might be able to join them in future; and how much worse if they found themselves forced to do that?

My experience in chairing the inquiry by the all-party parliamentary group on the British Council into resilience to extremism in north Africa and the middle east has shown clearly that there are an appalling number of criminal gangs looking to exploit vulnerable people in the region. Our role must be first to provide support in the region, upholding, for all the reasons we have heard, the principle that those who need international protection should be able to claim it in the first safe country they reach.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Has the hon. Gentleman had the benefit of reading the Human Trafficking Foundation’s report of last summer, “An independent inquiry into the situation of separated and unaccompanied minors in parts of Europe”? If he does so, he will see that, using evidence, it knocked the myth of the pull factor on the head.

David Warburton: I have not read it, but I would be extremely interested to do so, so I will look at it. I thank the hon. and learned Lady. It sounds like an interesting report. However, the pull factor does appear to be cited time and again. As I said, there is a clear example in Germany. I would therefore be intrigued to know how that organisation has come to the opposite conclusion.

We need to look at the quickest and the least precarious route to safety for refugees, rather than travelling into and across Europe to reach the UK. Having said that, it is also vital that we are in a position to continually review and mould policy to adapt ourselves to changing circumstances, as the Bill seeks to do. I am very pleased, as I said, that it is before the House and we are able to debate it. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), who is no longer in his place, I warn against using language like “empathy bypass” because that is not in the interests of a friendly, productive, non-partisan debate. We all have views. Obviously we all feel empathy, and we may express that in different ways. All opinion can be equally and properly expressed and valued, I hope.

Dr Whitford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Warburton: Let me get to the end of my speech.

I am very pleased that, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), the Justice Secretary is undertaking a review of legal aid reforms in which he will, properly, address the legal aid changes in respect of immigration cases. I look forward to seeing the report later this year and any changes that will result.
Above all, in tackling the plight of refugees we need to look at the causes. The Government must continue, as I have every faith that they will, to support international efforts to find a comprehensive and sustainable solution to the root causes of the refugee crisis. Yes, we must respond carefully and deliberately to the consequences of the situation in the middle east, but we must also focus hard on the matter itself. I feel sure that the Government will continue to do this, and I am sure that the whole House, if nothing else, will support those efforts.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on introducing the Second Reading of his Bill. Many of us in the House feel very strongly about this subject, and I am grateful for the opportunity to make my own contribution to the debate.

Like many of my right hon. and hon. Friends who are here today, I suspect, my interest in this Bill comes from personal experiences gained at my advice surgery. Lewisham, Deptford has more than its fair share of immigration casework, and many of the cases that my staff and I deal with are very troubling. However, it is those that fall within the scope of the Bill which are often the most traumatic.

In December last year, I met a Somali woman who is caring for her four nieces and nephews in Lewisham, after their father was murdered in front of them and their mother back home in Somalia. The mother disappeared for several years, until it was discovered that she had sought asylum in Cyprus. She is experiencing deteriorating physical health, as well as suffering mentally from the trauma of seeing her husband murdered. My constituent is in the process of trying to reunite her sister with her children, but under current rules, the sister has to undergo the lengthy, stressful and costly process of applying for a visa to settle here.

The Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network is an excellent but overstretched and under-resourced service in my constituency.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I know of the great work that the Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network has done in our borough. Will my hon. Friend join me in recognising the work of Action for Refugees in Lewisham, which I am sure will be assisted by the provisions of the Bill in helping some of the most vulnerable to be resettled in south London?

Vicky Foxcroft: I thank my hon. Friend and absolutely agree. We have so many wonderful organisations in Lewisham that do so much great work.

The Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network recently told me about a woman from Gambia who fled and claimed asylum in the UK with her youngest child in 2011, after finding out that Government forces were looking for her husband and family. Although she has now been reunited with her husband and one other child, her eldest daughter turned 18 in the intervening years and has not been allowed to join her family in the UK. A further child also remains in Gambia.

These are vulnerable people. As my hon. Friends will know, it is stressful enough to negotiate the Home Office system without adding the extra difficulties associated with having suffered significant trauma. The cost of making a visa application and instructing an immigration solicitor is also a significant barrier for many.

If Members will allow me, I will lighten the mood slightly and say that I am proud of the great work that my local council, the London Borough of Lewisham, has been doing to support refugees. After formally agreeing to join the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement programme in September 2016, Lewisham Council has housed 15 families from Syria, which, last time I checked, was the second highest number of any London borough.

Lewisham Council also informs me that it has offered 24 care places for unaccompanied refugee children, but the Home Office has only used one of them. That is completely unacceptable.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend points out the case in Lewisham. Does she acknowledge that that is the case with Labour-led councils across the country, which are offering to put more people up, but the Government are not using those places? The Government need to take action immediately to use those places.

Vicky Foxcroft: I agree with my hon. Friend. As I said, that is completely unacceptable. We have a council that is willing to help, and no doubt hundreds of vulnerable children need that help.

I will conclude, because I want us to get on and vote on the Bill. Like many or perhaps all of us here today, I firmly believe that if a child refugee has been granted the right to be in the UK, his or her parents or carers should also be granted that right. Equally, children who grew up in this country with a parent who has a right to live here should be allowed that right, even after they reach the age of 18. The Bill would enable both those things to happen, while also providing vital financial support in the form of legal aid. Families are being torn apart by the current rules, and that simply has to change.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton), who spoke of his commitment to this issue and highlighted his concerns about the Bill in a very constructive way, contrary to the way in which, sadly, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) presented it. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who shared her insight from her constituency, which is a very different constituency from mine. I respect her contribution and the insight she gave me into her surgery appointments.

The Government have done much good in this area, which I support. I rise with concerns about the Bill, as my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome did. While it is a pleasure to serve under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar on the International Trade Committee, where sometimes even we agree, I am afraid that on this matter and the substance of the Bill, I have my doubts. Without doubting his intentions, I believe he is wrong in this area.
Angus Brendan MacNeil: If the hon. Gentleman has doubts, the best place to take them is to Committee. I will happily escort him through the Lobby, when we vote on the Bill. We can discuss this in Committee, and I am sure he will allow those doubts to be raised there.

Mr Jayawardena: The hon. Gentleman escorts me all around the world as we build positive trade relationships with our friends around the world. I will talk about some of that, and perhaps we can continue to agree on that, rather than on the substance of the Bill.

First, let us consider what the Bill asks. It aims to require the Home Secretary within six months to widen immigration rules and grant visas to a wide range of relatives. I contend that making it easier for a parent to join a child refugee could incentivise families to send their child ahead on a perilous journey, often in the hands of unscrupulous people traffickers.

The Bill would also amend the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, to extend legal aid to family reunion applications, but this is taxpayers’ money, and we must therefore be very responsible in how we spend it. The Bill makes no mention of how to encourage integration, how to provide education or how to offer other opportunities to refugees; nor does it make any attempt to tackle the situations that people are fleeing. Rather, it simply accepts that that will continue to be the case.

Anna Soubry: I urge my hon. Friend to consider that this Bill is about refugees—not economic migrants, with whom one might have some sympathy, but people who are fleeing war, persecution and terror on a scale that none of us can even begin to imagine. The idea that someone would willingly put their child in an even more perilous place is frankly for the fairies.

Mr Jayawardena: I respect my right hon. Friend’s contributions and her right to make them to the House, but as she lets me extend my argument, I think she will understand why I have concerns about this process, but as she lets me extend my argument, I think she will understand why I have concerns about this process, and perhaps we can continue to agree on that, rather than on the substance of the Bill.

Human Trafficking: Legislation

Steve McCabe: Thirty years on from the UN convention and 20 years on from the protocol amending it, article 3 of the 1989 UN convention on the rights of the child ensures that the best interests of the child must always be the primary consideration.

Mr Jayawardena: I will give way in a moment.

When assessing asylum claims, Home Office officials must already consider the best interests of the child. A similar consideration must be taken under another of the UK’s commitments in international law, which is as a signatory to the European convention on human rights. The UK is a signatory because of a historical desire to spread British values, and often where British values lead, the world has followed. It is often said that the convention was originally conceived by Churchill and drafted mainly by British lawyers.

It is perhaps ironic that, as I contend, shameless ambulance-chasing lawyers now use the convention as a stick with which to hit Britain in all sorts of situations. That is perhaps worst seen in their behaviour over soldiers in Iraq and Northern Ireland, but some of the worst offenders in the legal profession also use their skills to purport that certain people are refugees when they are not. That devalues the argument, which should rightly be agreed across the whole House, that genuine refugees ought to have the support of this country.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend has made brief reference to the ECHR. Does he share my concern that while it sounds great, Russia is actually a signatory—and look at its dismal human rights record under Mr Putin?

Mr Jayawardena: My hon. Friend anticipates my argument. I set rights in the context of rights and responsibilities. In fact, he reminds me of my maiden speech, in which I referred to King John, who rode from his castle in my constituency to sign Magna Carta, creating rights for the first time in 1215. I said in my maiden speech that “human rights were not conceived in 1998. They have existed for centuries, but they did not exist in a vacuum. Rights were balanced by responsibilities.”—[Official Report, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 646.]

It was no less true in 1215 than in 2015 that rights to reunite refugees’ families must be balanced by responsibilities to prevent them from coming to harm and by responsibilities to the rest of our country.
Steve McCabe: Since the hon. Gentleman is giving us a history lesson, does he not agree that the best example in history of a mother sending off her child on a perilous journey is that of Jochebed placing Moses in a basket because she feared what would happen to him? Should the hon. Gentleman not be drawing on such examples, rather than telling us about his fears for push or pull factors?

Mr Jayawardena: If the hon. Gentleman had been paying attention from the back of the class, he would have heard me say repeatedly that I support genuine refugees being sent to other countries to be looked after by Britain and our allies in the world. The trouble is that this system can be abused. That is why article 8 of the European convention on human rights provides a qualified right to respect family and private life. While this can be interfered with for the purposes of maintaining effective immigration controls, the interference must be proportionate. As refugees cannot easily return to their families, Home Office officials must already take respect for family life into account.

To continue my history lesson, which the hon. Gentleman is so much enjoying, a final EU agreement of note is the Dublin regulation, which prioritises respect for family reunion above certain other considerations, such as the state in which the refugee has initially entered the EU. The Government have supported this, announcing a £10 million fund to support the Dublin provision and seconding Home Office officials to France, Italy and Greece to improve the handling of Dublin transfer cases. However, it is again important to note that no automatic right of family reunion is conferred. These rules only determine which country a person can stay in while they await an asylum decision.

Here is the big problem that the Bill does not seek to resolve: the United Kingdom respects its obligations under international law—I have outlined them—but it is vital that other countries do so too, because at present they do not. Described as the “electronic centrepiece” of the Dublin regulations, Eurodac is the central system of fingerprints designed to document where all refugees have arrived. However, the police authorities in Germany have said that they could not keep up, and there has been a similar situation in Greece—in 2015, Greece estimated that more than a third of all the people arriving were not fingerprinted—and in Italy.

Greece and Italy have the highest number of people recorded under category 2—someone irregularly crossing the border, rather than an asylum seeker. After 18 months, category 2 data are erased, subverting the Dublin regulations and enabling people to apply for asylum in another EU member state, even if they should not be entitled to do so. This is wrong, because Italy and Greece are safe countries. Any Opposition Member wishing to disagree with me about Italy and Greece being safe countries should take that up with the ambassadors from those countries. There is no reason for a genuine refugee fleeing horrific violence and persecution not to feel a flood of relief and a sense of safety on arrival in either country.

Obviously, for the avoidance of doubt, it is right for the United Kingdom to play our part, and we do. Perhaps the reason why so many of the arrivals are not registering their fingerprints and applying for asylum is that they are not refugees fleeing conflicts in Syria or elsewhere in the middle east, but economic migrants from countries further afield, perhaps in sub-Saharan Africa.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): On the point about national responsibility, does my hon. Friend recognise that Britain is one of six countries in the world that is meeting its 0.7% target for spending on international aid? So few countries are doing so, including many in the European Union.

Mr Jayawardena: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Again, he pre-empts my remarks, for I will talk a little bit about aid, which is a vital part of this debate.

Before I do so, I want to mention what one of my constituents has said. Graham wrote to me, saying that the fact “that the majority of would-be asylum seekers have landed within the EU on Mediterranean coasts and have then chosen to cross several countries within the EU (all of which could have provided refuge) does seem to contradict the argument that they are escaping persecution, hardship or war.”—[Interruption.]

I suggest that Opposition Members listen to the views of people in the country, rather than belittle them. This is, of course, the establishment view of people bought by vested interests, but they should actually consider what people feel in the country. They have all been criticising my constituent and maligning his views and intentions, but this very same constituent wrote in the same email of his “personal belief in a sensible, compassionate system of accepting genuine refugees where possible”, and I agree with him.

Anna Soubry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Jayawardena: No. I must make some progress. The UK’s commitments under international law—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman’s speech is not addressing the Bill. The people covered by the Bill are already here. This is another problem.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): That is not a point of order. The hon. Gentleman will continue his speech.

Mr Jayawardena: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The UK’s commitments under international law, which we clearly follow more carefully than some other countries, and the letters that I have received from constituents show that the UK does care about refugees. We resettle many of them in the UK under various different schemes already. Under the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, the UK had resettled over 10,500 people by last month. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has highlighted several points that it is important to reiterate today about why as a country we can be proud: first, this is “the largest number of any European country”; secondly, nearly half of those resettled have been children; and thirdly, we are “over half way towards honouring our commitment”, and, as a consequence, the Government are considering whether the UK should extend its target.
In addition, over 500 children have been resettled under the middle east and north Africa vulnerable children’s resettlement scheme—the “children at risk” scheme—while 220 unaccompanied children have been resettled from Europe under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016 and another 8,000 Syrian asylum seekers have been granted asylum since 2011. The UK also operates the gateway protection programme, which allows the resettlement of up to 750 refugees every year who are referred to the UK by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees under the 1951 convention. Furthermore, we have the mandate refugee programme, under which the Home Office considers asylum applications from individuals who have been granted refugee status by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees at either a local UNHCR office or the British embassy in the country of refuge and who have close ties to the UK—including, but not limited to, family here. Applying to the UK through the immigration system is an additional option open to refugees.

In total, since 2010 the UK has provided asylum or protection to 28,000 children, and in the last five years 24,700 family reunion visas have been granted. Over 5,000 of the 8,000 decisions on family reunion applications—two thirds—between October 2016 and September 2017 were granted. What all these schemes have in common, of course, is that UN-recognised refugees living overseas are being resettled in the UK. In 2016, the UK resettled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU member state. The UK will gladly resettle genuine refugees living overseas where this is deemed to be in their best interests but—crucially—with people being encouraged to undertake life-threatening journeys to apply.

The UK has resettled many thousands of refugees, even if Opposition Members choose to dismiss that, and has spent billions in aid, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) mentioned, to help look after refugees in the countries where they first seek refuge, or perhaps in their own country. Only yesterday morning, listening to BBC Radio 4’s “Today” programme, I heard the testimony of several residents living under more than three weeks of bombardment in eastern Ghouta, the opposition rebel stronghold on the edge of Damascus. Deana Lynn, an English language teacher, is the mother of seven young daughters and one son. She met her Syrian husband in 1990, and almost 20 years ago they moved to eastern Ghouta from the US to be close to his elderly parents. Here is what she said:

“This my kitchen. Here in the eastern Ghouta we use the fridge as a cupboard to store things in. My daughter’s doing the dishes. I know the world is waiting for us to evacuate. But it’s not right. It’s not right to kick someone out of their own land. It’s not right to go in and force people to leave. What will happen to them? They’ll just be a displaced people, wherever they go people will look down on them. How do I think all this will end? I’m not sure to tell you the truth. I know what I hope and I hope that something good will happen, that everything will be okay, and that’s what I tell myself: everything will be okay.”

Opposition Members seem to be uninterested in the experience of someone living through hell, but I pray that Deana is right. I believe that she makes an excellent point. It is all the more relevant today because this is her lived experience—she and her family are doing no more than surviving—in an underground shelter, a basement. Perhaps we should listen to people such as Deana and not just assume we know how they think and feel. People should not be forced to flee their countries and make dangerous journeys halfway across the world.

That is why we should be proud of all the aid—and the 25 million food rations—that the UK has given. Back in 2016, David Cameron pledged an additional £1.2 billion of support for refugees from Syria, including in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Last year, the Government unveiled a £1 billion aid package for Syrian refugees, providing food, shelter, vaccines, healthcare and education, skills and job opportunities, “so they don’t feel forced to make the perilous and potentially life-threatening journey to Europe.”

There are many other UK aid projects too, including £300 million towards a facility for refugees in Turkey; £200 million of economic development opportunities for Syrian refugees in Jordan; and almost £200 million to support Palestinian refugees. To people listening on the radio or watching on the television, it should be crystal clear that the UK cares, the Government care, I care. That is why we should not virtue signal today.

Even with the clear commitment shown to helping refugees, it is important that we retain careful control over our asylum system. [Interruption.] We accept that Members not being heard in the House. Every Member is entitled to espouse their own views. I will continue in that vein. Let us take Sweden, for example. The Guardian—no critic of immigration, of course—described the situation in Sweden back in 2015 as “almost at bursting point… There have been small riots in Malmo over the demolition of a migrant camp set up for Palestinians and a general sense that the fabric of Swedish society is under strain.”

Those are not my words but the words of The Guardian. The Telegraph makes no effort to gloss over things: “when asylum seekers have their case rejected, most disappear… On average, seven out of 10 of those facing deportation just vanish. Or, rather, they stay in the country and keep gaming a system that could have been designed for ease of exploitation.”

Anna Soubry: I gently say to my hon. Friend that this is not one of his greatest contributions. The Conservative party stands proudly on its record of offering refuge, especially to children in conditions of the kind he has actually described. May I please remind him that the Bill is about people who are genuine refugees and have been granted that status? If he could confine his comments to that, this debate would progress in a much more pleasant way.

Mr Jayawardena: I respect my right hon. Friend and her position as a sponsor of the Bill. It is entirely her right to do that, but equally it is my right, and that of any Member, to hold contrary views. My argument, as I outlined earlier, is that some people game the system, which is wrong, and the risk, in my view, is that the Bill could encourage more people to do that or to undertake dangerous journeys and so sadly put more children in harm’s way.

Even the children that Sweden attempts to resettle can suffer if refugees are granted asylum without careful management. The article in The Telegraph stated that “in 2004, it was absorbing about 400 children a year. Five years ago, this had grown to 2,600 - and even then, the system was starting to creak... Last year, 35,000 unaccompanied children claimed asylum in Sweden”
[Mr Jayawardena]

and that

“providing the right care to so many is a task that would overwhelm a superpower, let alone a small Nordic state... Care homes have been set up so quickly that they fall far short of what’s needed to protect the staff, let alone the children. On Monday, a 22-year-old working at one of the homes - herself the daughter of immigrants - was stabbed to death.”

This is no lone case:

“18 boys were found in an abandoned house with no toilets and no heating; the temperature was well below zero. They were sleeping on the floor, many under the same quilt to keep warm - one was just nine years old. But after being placed in a care home, they ran away and ended up sleeping rough again.”

Further:

“There are ‘anchor children’, who are sent ahead by their desperate family—

the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle made earlier—

“There are also trafficked children, who may still be in the hands of gangmasters and are being forced into work or prostitution. And there are the ‘street children’ who live in abandoned buildings and are often sucked into a criminal underworld.”

The article concluded:

“the lesson from the Continent is clear: to let in more immigrants than you can handle leads to trouble, but to admit more children”

Hon. Members: Shame!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Can we calm it down, please? I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is returning to the Bill.

Mr Jayawardena: I am getting very close, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you for your intervention.

I need to make that quotation clear—they are not my words but the words of the article:

“the lesson from the Continent is clear: to let in more immigrants than you can handle leads to trouble, but to admit more children than you can care for leads to tragedy.”

Before I wind up I should refer to Germany as well, where a similar situation arose when up to 1 million refugees and migrants entered in 2015. The Telegraph reported a terrible incident that occurred on 19 December, when a failed asylum seeker from Tunisia ploughed a truck into a Christmas market in Berlin, leaving 12 dead.

Perhaps no event was more disgusting and disgraceful than the events of new year’s eve 2015 in Cologne, when the BBC reported that more than 1,000 criminal complaints were filed, hundreds of them alleging sexual assault. An officer with the federal police stated in his report about that night:

“Women, accompanied or not, had to run a literal ‘gauntlet’ of heavily intoxicated masses of men of a kind that is impossible to describe...the situation we were confronted with (chaos) could have led to serious injuries or even to death.”

As a consequence, by April 2017, although a majority of Germans still said that refugees were “very welcome” or “quite welcome”, a majority were also saying for the first time that their country simply could not take in any more.

The UK has the potential to face similar issues. As I begin to close my remarks—I suspect that will delight Opposition Members—I wish to talk about how learning English is central for integration into British society. It gives refugees opportunities, and in the case of 28,000 children who have been resettled since 2010, an education. However, the Bill does not deal with that; it does not help to provide refugees with English language training, integration or opportunities. It does not think through the implications of that, or consider the hard-working people up and down our land who have aspirations for themselves and their families—hard-working people who should not suffer because of the strain on public services that could be created by the policy in the Bill.

In conclusion, the current family reunion policy is designed to provide a safe and legal route with no application fee to be paid, so that close, dependent family members can join their refugee family in the UK. That avoids the need for family members to make dangerous journeys to seek protection. I have highlighted the UK’s many other excellent refugee resettlement schemes, and it is crucial that our efforts are concentrated on ensuring that the existing schemes are used to full effect, and that the current rules work properly and effectively, without the need for family members to make dangerous journeys to seek protection. That way we can help those who need it most.

Anyone can provide examples of individual, heart-wrenching cases where our current system has not worked for an individual. However, let us be judged by what we do, not just by what we say. It is easy to vote for something in this place without thinking through the consequences. It is easy to get caught up in virtue signalling, without a second thought for the men, women and children we are here to represent. It is easy, as some Opposition Members have done, to cast aside the views of the British people. The British people are a kind, generous people who are happy to provide a beacon of hope to so many around the world, but they want to see their money well spent, and they naturally want to look after their own families too. To cast aside those views would be wrong, for the British people are right.

We must do what is best for those at risk of being trafficked or of making life threatening journeys by reducing that risk. We must do what is best for the millions of refugees overseas, and we can help more of them, and to greater effect, by providing billions in aid so that they can stay in or near the lands they call their own. We must do what is best to keep control of our system and protect the hard-working, law-abiding, decent, charitable but silent majority across our United Kingdom.

11.33 am

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) for sponsoring this most important Bill, and for his excellent and eloquent speech. His remarks were in sharp contrast to those by the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), who does not know the difference between a refugee and a migrant, and who clearly has not read the Bill. I also thank many constituents from Dundee who support this Bill, and who have emailed or written to me, and sent me messages on Facebook, in the run-up to this debate.

We face unprecedented times. More than 65 million people around the world have been forced from their homes owing to conflict, persecution, and the effects of climate change. That is the entire population of the United Kingdom. More than 22 million of those people
are refugees, and half of them children. Every Member of the House was once a child, so let us keep that at the heart of our debate today. Many of those children have been torn away from their families and are desperate to be reunited with them, but they are being kept apart thanks to bureaucratic hurdles in UK policy.

Make no mistake: the UK Government’s refugee family reunion rules are restrictive and unfair, and refugees who have reached safety in the UK can find it impossible to bring their family members to join them. Currently, the only family members who are allowed to join adult refugees in the UK are someone’s partner and dependent children, but only those under the age of 18. Unaccompanied children granted refugee status have no right to be reunited with their brother or sister, mother or father. That means that family members who have become separated and remain outside the UK are left with the invidious choice of staying in dangerous places or embarking on treacherous, expensive, and unregulated journeys. Only after surviving that journey and reaching European shores does the UK legally recognise someone’s sibling, aunt, uncle or grandparent as a family member with whom they can reunite. Let us not forget that last year more than 3,000 people died making the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean—a disgraceful border that the EU has put up on the shores of northern Africa.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that many excellent volunteers, including from the UK, have joined others in the Mediterranean to assist those people in desperate need? Sometimes that part of the world looks more like a cemetery than somewhere where we are saving lives.

Chris Law: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady, and if it had not been for those volunteers, it is likely that the number dying would have been far greater.

Legal aid has not been available for refugee family reunions since 2012, which makes it even more difficult for families to reunite. A recent report by Oxfam and the Refugee Council highlighted the negative effects of those rules on refugee families. Evidence found overwhelmingly that reuniting refugee families gives them the best chance of living settled and fulfilling lives—I am sure no one in this House would not want that. Separation can have a devastating impact on refugees, their recovery from traumatic experiences, and their ability to integrate and adapt to their country of asylum.

This Bill has cross-party support and seeks to do three things. I will describe those things succinctly because some people clearly do not understand what the Bill is about. First, it expands the criteria for who can qualify for family reunions since 2012, which makes it even more difficult for families to reunite. A recent report by Oxfam and the Refugee Council highlighted the negative effects of those rules on refugee families. Evidence found overwhelmingly that reuniting refugee families gives them the best chance of living settled and fulfilling lives— I am sure no one in this House would not want that. Separation can have a devastating impact on refugees, their recovery from traumatic experiences, and their ability to integrate and adapt to their country of asylum.

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possible for them to make new lives nearer to home, rather than to embark on dangerous journeys. All of that is good and right—the money we have invested through the Department for International Development and other programmes—and the Bill does not seek to criticise or undermine it in any way. The Bill deals with a specific area of the law in relation to family reunion, a concept that is accepted in our law and, indeed, is accepted in Government policy.

The issue is that in practice some areas of the law do not work well or fail. The Bill does no more than try to improve the law in that regard and to make it work in a fairer fashion for, as has been observed, a very small number of people. The real issues about pull factors and so on, be they right or wrong, are addressed through other Government policy initiatives that are nothing to do with the Bill. This is a small and modest but very useful measure. We would do well to keep that in context.

The position of legal aid in family reunion cases is being considered by the Lord Chancellor. I am glad about that—the Justice Committee has pressed long and hard for there to be a review of LASPO—but that does not mean they should not also seek to entrench the rules through the Bill. It is very clear from the evidence we heard that there was a misapprehension that cases of this kind are simple and straightforward. The evidence from practitioners in the field—from the British Red Cross, pro bono lawyers and others—clearly demonstrated that in the vast majority of cases it is in fact quite complicated. We only have to think about it: genuine refugees flee in fear. As I said in an earlier intervention, they are not likely to have had the time or inclination to have gone through a tick-box exercise on what documentation they might need at some point further down the line in the future under regulations of which they, by the very nature of things when they leave, have no knowledge. They then have to go through a process which is, for perfectly good reasons, complex and full of legalese. They have to do so in what is almost invariably going to be a foreign language and under circumstances of great stress and pressure.

I note that from the research of the British Red Cross and the lawyers involved, in something like 74% of family reunion cases at least one original document required under the current rules is missing. That is hardly surprising given the way people have fled and have ended up here—lawfully and properly accepted, I hardly surprising given the way people have fled and have ended up here—lawfully and properly accepted, I

The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. Any delay in any kind of tribunal case causes pressure and hardship, and makes for less effective justice. The longer things drag on, the harder it is to ensure that evidence is good and genuine. It is particularly harsh in cases such as these.

For all those reasons, I hope hon. Members will support the Bill. If they do not feel they can support it, or feel that changes are needed, I hope they will not prevent its Second Reading but let it go to Committee to see if changes and improvements can be made. I suspect the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, the promoter of the Bill, and those of us who support it are willing to do that. As someone who believes passionately in being a one nation Conservative, and who joined the party of Harold McMillan, Disraeli, Churchill and indeed Margaret Thatcher, who did a great deal to support the communities who came from east Africa when she succeeded Ted Heath as leader of my party, I hope nobody will seek to stand in the way of the Bill making progress today.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I agree with most of what the hon. Gentleman is saying. There is another problem: people are led to believe that the process takes 13 weeks, but we know it takes months. That often causes unnecessary hardship, delay and anxiety.

Robert Neill: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. Any delay in any kind of tribunal case causes pressure and hardship, and makes for less effective justice. The longer things drag on, the harder it is to ensure that evidence is good and genuine. It is particularly harsh in cases such as these.

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Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Let me begin by thanking the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) for introducing the Bill and thanking all the other Members who support it.

I want to put on record my thanks to Oxfam, the Red Cross, the Refugee Council, UNHCR, Amnesty International and many other charities for their campaigning on this issue. This coalition of charities shows the breadth and strength of support for refugee family reunion. This morning, many Members have put forward clear and convincing arguments in support of today’s Bill. I will use my time, which will be brief because I want to ensure that we have a vote, to outline why the Bill appeals to Labour values of fairness, respecting human rights and protecting the vulnerable in our society, and why we will therefore be supporting it.

The Labour party believes in respect for human rights, which are at the centre of our approach to foreign policy, development and the treatment of migrants and refugees on our soil. That includes the right to family life. At the moment, the definition of who is considered “close family” for the purposes of family reunion is narrow. It includes the spouse or partner of an adult refugee, and their dependent children under the age of 18. It does not include young siblings, elderly parents or older dependent children.
Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that allowing families to sponsor their immediate family would be an easy change to implement? It would affect a small number of child refugees, but it would have a transformational impact on how we treat them in this country.

Afzal Khan: I agree with my hon. Friend and will address that issue later.

We have a perverse situation where unaccompanied children are not allowed to bring their close family members to join them in the same way an adult can. These are already some of the most vulnerable children in our society. They face language and cultural barriers, on top of the trauma of being forced to flee war and violence. We are one of the only countries in Europe that further denies them the right to reunite with their families. Evidence shows that refugees who are not permitted to be joined by close relatives struggle to integrate. It is clear that so long as there are push factors of war, violence and persecution, people will be forced to flee their homes. Safe and legal routes to family reunion disrupt the work of smugglers and people traffickers.

The Opposition welcome some recent Government achievements. The Sandhurst treaty committed to speeding up the process for refugees in France to join family members in the UK. We welcome investment in the processing of Dublin cases and agree that we need to look at the whole issue of routes taken by refugees.

On a personal level, I believe that the Minister takes seriously her obligations to refugees and wants to fulfil Britain’s commitment to vulnerable children in particular. However, fulfilling our existing commitments is not enough. The Government have not yet promised that that agreement will continue after Brexit or that they will change the UK’s immigration rules to align them with the current Dublin III provisions. In a recent Westminster Hall debate, the Minister said:

“I regard it to be an absolute priority to take the 480 young people we have committed to.”—[Official Report, 22 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 187WH.]

She was referring to the Dubs scheme, but 480 young people is well below the original intention of the Dubs amendment, which was to resettle 3,000 young people, and significantly fewer than the 10,000 refugees a year that the UN has called on Britain to take. The refugee crisis is a large and complex challenge. Reforming the UK’s family reunion rules would be a simple but important step towards addressing the anomalies in our refugee system. It would affect a small number of people, but it would transform their lives.

The Bill is based on liberal values of fairness, human rights and the protection of the most vulnerable. Labour Members will support its Second Reading, and I hope that all other Members will as well.

11.55 am

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I, too, am proud to sponsor the Bill. I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeill), and endorse everything that he said in his excellent speech. I also fully endorse everything that was said by, in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). Ever the lawyer, he made the valid point that the Bill is very modest. It not only improves the immigration system but it will allow refugees to bring their children to the UK and make their lives better.

This is a small but incredibly important measure, which also enables us to send a strong signal from the Conservative Benches about the type of Conservative that we are all proud to call ourselves. It is very easy to take a group of people and attach to them a label that dissociates oneself from seeing each and every person in that group as what he or she is: a human being with a story to tell.

Let me remind the House what a refugee is. A refugee is defined as

“A person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster.”

It is not a free choice. No one wakes up of a morning and says, “I think that today I will leave everything I have ever known and loved for generations, and make myself a refugee.” I will dwell on that in a moment, but first let me pay tribute to my own Conservative local authority, Broxtowe Borough Council.

We have taken in four Syrian families. Not only have we accommodated and provided for them—as well as welcoming them—but we have continued to support them, because each of those four families is in our country for a very good reason. They are not here just
because they are refugees, as in my description. At least one member of each family has suffered in a way that goes beyond some of our comprehension. Those family members have been tortured, or have been subjected to some form of sexual abuse, or have a particular medical need which means that the last place they should be is in a refugee camp, or in the sort of accommodation that the Jordanian Government have—rightly—provided. Their need is even greater, and I am proud that we have given them a home in Broxtowe.

I am also proud of the work that our Government have done in respect of the provision of aid for refugees, and not just those fleeing from Syria. In more recent times we have been providing aid for the Rohingya people, and I am proud of our 0.7% record.

When I went to Jordan just over a year ago as a guest of Oxfam, along with the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), the reality of meeting a human being—not seeing the label on a group of people, but meeting individuals—was one of the most profound things that has ever happened to me in my life. I met a teacher, a man living in two rooms with his two children and his wife, in the cold, sitting around one of those peculiar gas heaters that are provided. I am going to be very blunt in my description of this remarkable man, because what I saw in his eyes was shame.

He felt almost ashamed that he was living in such circumstances; I am not saying he was a proud man in any way, but I would not be surprised if he was so. This is a real human being; he did not choose to be in those circumstances through any desire other than to escape the real horrors of Syria. He left his job; he left his home. I met other people who had left successful businesses, but it does not matter what class they are, or what trade or skill they might have; they are human beings who fled abominable circumstances. They must have been abominable, otherwise they would not have left, and they scooped up the barest of possessions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said. They do not think, “Have I got this piece of paper?” or whatever; they just get the hell out.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I have a very similar case. A young architect called Samira escaped from Syria. She was separated from her husband Samir, but he finally, with help from my office, managed to get to this country. They are both practising architects, now contributing to the country, but they escaped war-torn Syria and were separated. This Bill will enable other such families and couples to thrive and contribute to our country.

Anna Soubry: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady, and there are many such examples.

I went to the Zaatari refugee camp, where I met a 19-year-old who had lived in a tin shed for four years. His father had had his own business in Syria. Again, he scooped up everything and fled, through terror. Meeting this 19-year-old was a genuinely concerning and distressing experience. Where was his hope? He had been there for four years; he did not want to be in that place. He could not work, and although our Government are doing a fine job of providing education for his younger siblings, where was his hope?

The second most striking feature I experienced was the clear desire to go home. They do not want to be living in those conditions; they want to go home—they want to go back to their country, of which they are so proud. We should try to imagine year after year after year seeing the possibility of returning to our home disappearing. These are remarkable people: their hope, their strength, their humanity, and the way they kept themselves together, somehow with a semblance of pride, has never left me.

Huw Merriman: I, too, went to Zaatari, and what my right hon. Friend says about the concern that people will eventually lose hope is absolutely right. Things are not easy in Jordan, albeit they could be worse. However, having made that trip, does she perhaps share my genuine concern about the pull factor arguments? [Interruption.] This is a genuine concern that I am asking about.

Anna Soubry: I completely understand my hon. Friend’s genuine concern; I just do not believe that there is any evidence to support it. Let us all stop and get real. History tells us: the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) referred to Biblical times, and we have referred to the plight of the Jews in Germany and other countries. As my hon. Friend will understand, these people are living in the most appalling conditions, surrounded by war and terror day after day, month after month, and year after year. To suggest that someone deliberately, cruelly tries to get their child out of that horror in order to follow them is, frankly, as appalling as it is clearly not right; it is verging on madness. People do not do that for that reason. They might well say, “How the hell can I get my child out of here?” because of their love and concern for that child and to try to keep that child safe, just as the Jews did in Germany. Nothing has changed in person-mankind over the centuries: our desire is to keep our children safe, not to use them as a route for our own escape. So let us crush that one. I gently ask where is the evidence of people doing that? It is the last thing genuine refugees would do.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I completely agree that family reunification is in the interests of health, wellbeing and humanity. However, is not the concern the impetus that it could give to criminal gangs and human traffickers? We must recognise that genuine concern if we are to safeguard these families and children.

Anna Soubry: We are talking about people who are already here and whose status as genuine refugees has already been determined. The idea that there are gangs of people smugglers in Syria going through that desperate warzone and enticing families to put their children into their hands is the stuff of fantasy. [Interruption.] No, it really is the stuff of fantasy.

It behoves on all of us to conduct these important debates on the basis of facts and evidence—and yes, at times, emotion. Look at the problems we have in our country with the lack of understanding. If I may say so, perhaps that has been evident in some of the speeches we have heard today.

If somebody living in very poor circumstances comes to this country, that person is an economic migrant, and that is profoundly different. Even if they enter the
country illegally, we can understand why they are coming here. These people come here not to take, but to give. For centuries people have come to this country from other parts of the world because they want to build a better life for themselves and their children. I have always welcomed them, because they contribute by virtue of their immigration status. They are fleeing poverty and come for a better life. They do not expect us to provide for them.

Huw Merriman: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way again; she is making a heartfelt speech. Perhaps I can articulate the concern here. We hear that the Bill relates only to children who are already here, but my understanding is that it will apply to future child refugees. The concern on the Government Benches is that, as people traffickers take advantage of these changes, more children could be pulled into desperate and evil situations in which they are taken advantage of. Our concern is about welfare, not some of the other points that have been made.

Anna Soubry: Again, my hon. Friend misses the point. These are people with the status of refugees; they have been through all the systems and are accepted as genuine refugees. This is just a fake and ploys that is being put forward.

It says a lot that there is this lack of understanding about the difference between an economic migrant and a refugee. During the referendum debate—I am not going to get into Brexit, Mr Deputy Speaker—people rightly raised the issue of immigration. I remember having a conversation with a constituent who said that she was voting for leave, “because there were too many Muslims in our country.” That is the level of debate in our nation. That is the level of plain misunderstanding and misinformation. That is why this debate is so important.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: If there was any truth in the idea that people are being sent ahead to act as an anchor, surely it would be the adult who would go, because it is the adult who would have the legal right to be here. We know from the adult experience—and we are trying to equalise the law for the child experience—that this is nonsense. As the right hon. Lady says, it is fantasy. Nobody wakes up one morning and decides to become a refugee; it is the circumstances and situation around them that force them to go, whether they are an adult or a child.

Anna Soubry: Let me bring my remarks to a conclusion, Mr Deputy Speaker. Of course I agree with everything the hon. Gentleman has said; he is absolutely right on this. Hon. Members have nothing to fear in this Bill. It is the right thing to do, legally and morally. Even if they cannot vote for the Bill, I ask them to abstain. But they can go better than that, and I ask them to support this excellent piece of legislation.

12.10 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I stand proudly today in support of the Bill, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on his determination in bringing the Bill forward, despite some efforts from people in this Chamber to show little empathy and to frustrate this process. I support this Bill for my refugee and migrant constituents, and for their loved ones unable to join them. This Bill will give a lifeline to families torn apart, first, by conflict, and, then again, by unfair and nonsensical immigration rules. Currently, refugees can be joined only by parents or by children under the age of 18. Unaccompanied minors in the UK cannot currently sponsor anyone to join them. This Bill will expand who qualifies as “family” so that vulnerable people, such as the elderly and children over the age of 18, may be able to reunite with their families in the UK, and it will allow unaccompanied children, who have to adjust to life in the UK without a single family member there to support them, to sponsor relatives to join them.

I support this Bill because some of my constituents do not know when they will see their families again. Abdul Charif, a young man from Syria, came to study in the UK in 2006, but when he attempted to return to his home town after his studies he was forced to flee again and make the perilous journey back to the UK. He settled in Sheffield and applied for a visa to visit his family, who had made it past the Syrian border to Turkey, but he was rejected. He sought help from every agency and organisation available to try to be reunited with his family, but to no avail. In 2016, the Government brought in the vulnerable persons relocation scheme. Abdul applied, and later that year he was finally informed that his family had been registered and that his case has been passed to the Home Office. Two years on, and six years after attempting to see his loved ones, he has yet to receive a single piece of correspondence telling him when exactly his family can join him.

It is hard to believe, but Abdul and his family are considered some of the lucky ones. When I asked why his family eventually qualified for the vulnerable persons relocation scheme, he told me that his elderly parents had developed serious health problems, in part because his older brother was tragically killed by a handmade bomb. They are considered the lucky ones, and they are still waiting. I cannot imagine what Abdul and his family have gone through. I also cannot imagine the grief and worry that he could have been saved had he been aided by a process which from the start had regarded his parents and sister as “family” in the way that we would for any citizen, as they might very well be with him today.

I support this Bill because children are missing their grandparents, their uncles and aunts, and their siblings. In November, 21 pupils from Byron Wood Academy in Sheffield wrote to me about the injustice of our immigration rules, and many of them are refugees or have parents who arrived in this country as refugees and then settled.

Michelle Donelan: The hon. Lady said she was supporting this Bill as it would help to reunite grandparents, and aunts and uncles. I understood that the Bill did not extend to those categories.

Gill Furniss: That is a fair point, and it is an aspiration of mine to see that everyone has the right to be reunited with their family. As I was saying, many of these children are growing up never knowing their relatives. They are just children, but even they could point out that the British Government are not adhering to article 10 of the UN convention on the rights of the child, which says that if you live in a different country from your
parents, you have the right to be together in the same place. These pupils urged me to challenge the Government’s double standard on who qualifies as "family" when someone is a refugee. So please, answer me: why should UK citizens be able to call their grandparents and grandfathers, and their siblings and cousins “family”, given that this right is not afforded to refugees? Why should unaccompanied child refugees not be allowed to sponsor anyone to come over and live with them?

Members should imagine fleeing their war-torn home, risking their life to get to the UK, and trying to start their life over again in a foreign country, and the trauma that they would experience. They should imagine growing up and experiencing the difficulties and turbulence of adolescence while also having to learn to cook, clean, read and write, all without having their parent there to guide them; and then imagine being told that their family cannot join them. I cannot imagine that—in my opinion, that is too much for anyone to bear.

We do not have any Government statistics on specific refugee family reunion applications, although we know that they now make up the majority of refugee applications. That in itself is telling. We are not paying enough attention to the issues that matter to refugees in this country. We are not giving them the support that they need to help them to rebuild their lives.

I am so proud of Sheffield and our legacy of welcoming refugees. Sheffield has so far provided a home to more than 1,500 refugees since 2014 and it is one of the areas in which the vulnerable persons resettlement programme is operating. We can do more, so let us rectify this. Let us vote with the spirit of Sheffield and pass the Bill, so that our families can start to rebuild their lives.

12.15 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss). I congratulate the Bill’s promoter, whose constituency I do not want to offend by trying to pronounce it, on introducing this important Bill on an important issue.

To debate the Bill properly, it is important to look at everything that the Government are already doing to help refugees and those fleeing conflict and persecution, as opposed to considering the Bill in isolation. Context is very important in this case. We have been investing in support for the most vulnerable refugees through resettlement programmes such as those that bring Syrian refugees over to Britain. By 2020, some 20,000 Syrian refugees will have been resettled, and around half have already arrived.

I am incredibly proud to represent Colchester and my residents, who have been so welcoming of those who have made their home in our town. I particularly commend Welcome Refugees Colchester and Fresh Beginnings, which do such great work in my constituency. The UK is settling 3,000 vulnerable children and family members from conflict zones in the middle east and north Africa. That is on top of the unaccompanied child refugees brought over from Europe under the Dubs scheme, which Members will note I supported. Several Members have said that that is not enough, but we should be clear that the Government are playing their part in helping those in need of sanctuary.

In 2016, the UK resettled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU state. Eurostat figures show that more than a third of people who have been resettled in the EU came to the UK. We need every European country to be play its part. It is long established in the Dublin III regulations that asylum seekers should apply for asylum in the first EU state at which they arrive. I accept that that can be an incredible administrative burden on some nations, so it is right that we do what we can to help.

The Government have committed £3.6 million to help to strengthen co-operation with France on the operation of the Dublin regulation and the development fund. I have no doubt that we will continue to work with other countries to identify projects that support genuine claims through the Dublin process. Those are not the actions of a Government who do not care about refugees. This is about getting the existing regulations working properly.

Jeremy Quin: I respect the position that my hon. Friend took on the Dubs amendment when it was debated in this place. I have been pondering the remarks made earlier by the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper); her concern that children in Greece may not be coming to this country because of worries about our rules on whether they can then bring in their parents. That does not change how I think about the Bill, but does my hon. Friend agree that it would be nice to hear the Government’s reaction to that and to establish whether what the right hon. Lady described was the official position of the Government in Greece and Governments elsewhere?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I, too, hope that the Minister will answer that specific point when she rises to her feet later in the debate. I agree that that issue potentially needs to be addressed—I might come to it a little later in my relatively brief contribution—but it does not address the fundamental reasoning in relation to supporting, or not supporting, this Bill.

As I have said, this Bill is about both getting the existing regulations working properly—many would say, I think, that they are not working properly at the moment—and ensuring that refugees can be identified, which is the most important thing, and then reunited with their families when they arrive safely in Europe. We do reunite families—that is a very clear point to make. Over the past five years, 24,700 family reunion visas have been issued. Since 2010, 49,830 people have been provided protection status in the UK—a status that means that they are entitled to apply for qualifying family members to join them. Suggestions that our immigration rules somehow prevent families from being together are simply not true.

Of course, the rules allow for a refugee’s partner and dependent children under the age of 18 to come to the UK. Unaccompanied child refugees are not allowed to sponsor applications from family members, yet, importantly, the rules also provide for scope to grant leave outside the rules in exceptional circumstances. That can allow for dependent children over the age of 18 to be reunited with family members in the United Kingdom.
Layla Moran: Exceptional circumstances can apply to so many of those who have sought refugee status in the UK. For example, my dear friend Bahareh in Oxford came to this country having converted to Christianity in Iran. She was persecuted and had to leave, but, as a result of her getting refugee status here, the rest of her family now face equal persecution. Some have been incarcerated, and some have also had to flee. Is that not an exceptional circumstance?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I do not know the full situation in that particular case, and I strongly advise her to raise it with the Minister. My wider point is that there is already a process in place by which the family reunification route can be taken. I appreciate her point about exceptional circumstances, and I very strongly advise her to raise her case with the Minister. It is not something that I can properly address—

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) rose—

Will Quince: I will come back to the hon. Lady in a moment, but I just want to make a little progress.

We need to address the current system, and the problems with the current system, before looking at further legislation. I will come to the other concerns of the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) in a few moments.

There are also other settlement schemes, such as Mandate, which can help eligible refugees with close family ties to the UK. We also need to recognise that widening eligibility, as this Bill does, will do nothing to tackle the refugee crisis in and of itself. Issues creating a pull factor have already been mentioned by numerous Members. I know that some have put opposing views to that, and I entirely respect that, but I think it is widely accepted that push factors of civil war and persecution are the single biggest deciding factor in whether an individual chooses to flee their country. As long as there is instability across the middle east and north Africa, vulnerable people will choose to continue to flee. We need to find sustainable solutions to these problems as well as to support those affected.

I think that everyone in this Chamber wants to ensure that eligible refugees are able to reunite with family members in the United Kingdom. I have to say, though, that there are questions over the approach that we take. I remain to be convinced by the Bill, as I have not yet made up my mind. I stress that as I want to hear the remainder of the debate, I will be brief in summing up.

I do not want to cause undue disagreement or discord in a debate that has otherwise been largely constructive, but I have to say that it is somewhat unhelpful of Members to label colleagues who do not feel able to support the Bill today as either lacking in empathy or being cold-hearted, which has happened both in this Chamber and on social media. I admit that I have yet to make up my mind on this issue. On the Dubs amendment, I made up my mind mid-way through the debate, much to the disappointment of the Whips Office. The point I am making is that people’s minds can be changed, and that it is not overly helpful to make those kinds of comments about individuals who have not yet made up their minds, or indeed who may not feel able, at this point, to support the Bill.

Accepting and noting the contributions of colleagues so far, I have a concern that the Bill would rapidly widen the eligibility criteria while not acknowledging the wider continuing problems with the Dublin process or the potential pull factors that it might generate. We want to make the Dublin regulations work. We are investing in our European allies to ensure that refugees, when they arrive in Europe, can be quickly processed and that family members can be identified. That is the sensible approach. All the while, we are working hard to resettle 23,000 vulnerable refugees.

I have always felt that this nation should react swiftly and decisively in response to large-scale crises. That is why I supported the Dubs scheme, and the record shows that I was one of only five Conservative Members to do so. However, this is not the same as wide-scale immigration reform. I welcome this Bill and I welcome the debate, which has been a good one with passionate contributions from numerous Members. I will listen to the remainder of the debate before forming an on-balance view.

12.25 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who cares immensely deeply about these issues. During the course of my speech, I hope to persuade him that this Bill should pass its Second Reading and that any concerns he may have should be dealt with in Committee, as that would be an opportunity to improve the Bill further.

This Bill is about putting family at the heart of the asylum and refugee system. Family is something that we all care about immensely. In our house, my family is in a state of greater chaos than normal at the moment because Ed, who does all the cooking, is currently several hundred miles in one direction, while our 18-year-old daughter is several hundred miles in the other direction on her first trip abroad alone. Although they are in safe places and I know that they will come home very soon, a part of me is away with them too. I keep checking my phone, particularly to make sure that my daughter is okay. That is what we all do with our families, who are immensely important to us all the time.

But this Bill is about what happens when people’s families are not safe and when they are not going to come home again because they cannot. It is about what happens when families have to go through the most awful things in the world: when they have to watch a parent being murdered or a child being raped; when they have to flee their homes because their neighbours’ homes have been bombed; when they have to make the most difficult journeys, and face exploitation, trafficking and abuse along the way; and when, somewhere along that journey, the family get split up. We know that this happens to so many refugees and we also know that it is in those times—when we face the worst of humanity—that we need our family the most. These people need those with whom they share a history, all that past and all those relationships, even if so much of that history, including their home, has been ripped from them.

Building family relationships is one of the most important things about being human. The refugee scheme and the asylum system are all about being human and standing up for humanity against the worst of inhumanity—against
the barbarism, persecution, war and conflict that can cause so much chaos in families’ lives. In the end, that is all that this Bill is about.

The current system is not working well enough to keep families of refugees together when they face the most difficult times of all. This Bill is about the Eritrean mother who has come here through a proper, managed, legal resettlement scheme, but who cannot bring her teenage son here because he is over 18. Even though she has been through terrible persecution along the way, she cannot be reunited with him. This Bill is about the family from Syria who cannot bring their 18-year-old daughter here from Lebanon because she is over 18.

The Government and other Conservative Members have set out a series of things in response. I want to address their points, because this should be a cross-party issue. So many of the refugee discussions that we have had in the past—on the Dubs amendment or even going back to the Kindertransport—have been cross-party debates, and they should and could be again.

The Government’s response has been partly to talk about all the good work that they rightly do to help families and refugees in the region. The Government do do excellent work, and I pay tribute to them, as have other Members. We all want that work to continue. We also know that this is not an either/or situation. We would not expect families to continue to be split up or to suffer simply because a lot of other families in the region are being helped. There is no reason not to help these families as well.

Next, the Government say that there is discretion within the existing system, and that there are other ways of doing this. The hon. Member for Colchester referred to the Mandate scheme and others. However, the problem is that they do not work well enough. In too many cases, the entry officers use their discretion to simply say no. Nobody has the resources to overturn that because there is no legal aid in England to be able to deal with some of those cases, and it is too hard and too difficult. The discretionary system is not working at the moment. The independent chief inspector of borders and immigration has said that there are serious problems with the way that it works.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that taking the refugee element out of scope through LASPO has had an adverse impact? The Bill is merely trying to reintroduce something that was there before LASPO took it away and would be greatly beneficial to people applying for a family reunion.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. To be honest, it is hard for anybody to navigate our immigration system or asylum system, but for someone who is trying to pull together their family and has been through very difficult circumstances, not being able to get any kind of legal aid makes it so much harder.

The next argument that people use is to say that this is going to create a pull factor, and that it will somehow make things much worse. There are strong responses to that. First, as the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) argued, this is only about those who have already demonstrated that they meet all the criteria for being refugees. There are tests in the system already. They have shown that they have been fleeing persecution or conflict, and it is now simply about their ability to reunite with their family. Many of them have come through the legal resettlement process that the Government have rightly brought in and extended, and that we all support.

Angus Brendan MacNeil rose—

Yvette Cooper: I give way to the hon. Gentleman, who has done so much work to bring this Bill to the House.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The right hon. Lady has demolished the pull factor argument. The person has to be a refugee already, so the pull argument is dead, according to her point. I thank her for that.

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right. I pay huge tribute to the work he has been doing.

Secondly, the current system encourages trafficking. It encourages illegal routes and dangerous routes because there is not a safe and legal route for people to travel on. The concern of the family I spoke to whose daughter is in Lebanon—this was some time ago—was that they were going to face a choice about whether to try and find a route through with smugglers or with traffickers to get her reunited with them because they did not have a legal route. The problem is that we are already driving people into the arms of traffickers and exploitation, and we should not do that.

Anna Soubry: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way; it is very kind of her. When I was in Jordan—I am sure that she has had experience of this as well—I saw that magnificent efforts are being made to settle refugees. However, I also came across a family where the elderly parents, or grandparents, were going to Austria and the youngest son and his wife and children were going to Canada. That situation would encourage them to look at those illegal ways to stay together, which, as the right hon. Lady rightly says, we all want to do with our families.

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Lady is exactly right. When people have been through such difficult experiences, and lost the home that they all shared, to be separated across the globe is so much harder—and at a time when they need their family the most.

My third response to the pull factor argument is that we are, in effect, saying to people, “You have to suffer more in order to deter others.” We are saying to those who have suffered the most already that they have to suffer more by not being reunited with their families because we are convinced that that might deter some fictional people who we think are going to respond in a particular way, when there is no evidence to show that. When there is real hardship and real hurt for families who are not being reunited, let us not make them suffer more for the sake of deterring others when there is no evidence that that will happen.

Huw Merriman: I thank the right hon. Lady for outlining the case against the pull factor. I did not want to be shouted at; I wanted to hear arguments. When I
was in Zaatari, there were about 100,000 people in that camp; 56% of the camp population is under 18, and there are about 79 births each week. My concern is that, while the figure may be 1,000 at the moment, as soon as we change our laws and that population, that is when the pull factor could come in. Can she address that concern?

Yvette Cooper: I just do not follow the hon. Gentleman’s argument. If he is basically arguing that any kind of family reunion will somehow act as a pull factor and therefore should not happen, that would be an argument for having no family reunion for anybody at all—not for any adult, any husband or any wife. But of course, nobody thinks that. Everybody thinks that family reunion is important and that we must make sure we can keep families together.

Huw Merriman: The right hon. Lady is kind to give way again. At the moment, families can come through. My concern is that if we change the law, a brave under-18 will say, “I will take that step, and this law will allow me to bring you with.” That is my concern, with such a large population. Perhaps that clarifies where I was coming from.

Yvette Cooper: If the hon. Gentleman was going to make that argument convincingly, he would be making the same argument about the 19-year-old, the 20-year-old, the 30-year-old and the 50-year-old. The problem is the evidence. We must remember that other countries across Europe have these rules about family reunion in place, and we do not see it becoming a pull factor to Hungary, Poland or all sorts of other countries.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: I am very conscious of time. I will give way a final time, because this is an important point to address.

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady; she is making a cogent argument, and that is what this place is for. She asks for evidence. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) mentioned the example of Germany in 2015 and the impact that the change of policy there had. Could she comment on that and say whether that is evidence one way or the other?

Yvette Cooper: We have to remember that what happened in Germany was at a time when we had huge migration out of Syria by people desperately fleeing at the height of the conflict and a lack of proper support in Turkey, so a huge number of people were crossing the Mediterranean at that time. It was very unusual circumstances and an unusual period.

I think all of us would want to ensure that migration, in particular for those who are fleeing, should be provided through legal, safe and settled routes. That is why I support the Government’s Syrian resettlement scheme. It is far better to have legal, safe routes than unmanaged or illegal routes through trafficking and so on. All of that must be right. However, we can ensure that we have a legal, managed scheme to help refugees, and that is exactly what the Bill is all about. It is about having a legal settlement route, not unmanaged migration routes. We know that if we do not have legal family reunion resettlement routes, that is when we get people falling into the hands of traffickers, and that is what increases the number of illegal and dangerous journeys.

For example, on all the visits that I took to Calais, which was an awful and bleak place with so many young people, pretty much every young person I spoke to had family in Britain. They were trying to get to Britain through these awful, dangerous routes because they were trying to be reunited with family and with people to keep them safe. They were not trying to make the journey to bring other people; they were trying to be reunited. The current system, without that legal family route, is what is causing so many problems.

Anna Soubry: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: I want to conclude, because I know that many Members want to speak.

In the end, this is about our humanity. We all believe that the close relationships of love, family, commitment and a sense of obligation are at the heart of what makes us human beings and at the heart of who we are. That is at the heart of the values that brought all of us, from both sides of the House, into this place, to have debates like this and argue about issues like this. We should keep those values of commitment, obligation to one another, love, respect and support for our families at the heart of our refugee programme. That is all the Bill is trying to do. If Members want to amend it or add some safeguards, they by all means should do so in Committee, when we get to that stage, but let us support the values of family now.

12.39 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am pleased to follow the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), who was eloquent, as ever. I am also pleased to have the opportunity presented by this Bill, which has been so poignantly debated today, to speak about Britain’s role in taking in refugees.

I want to say at the outset that as a mother of three children who are now—I cannot really believe this—over 18, I am very pleased that the Government are listening carefully to concerns raised about this issue by non-governmental organisations and others, and that Home Office officials are currently reviewing our approach to family reunion as part of the Government’s wider assessment of asylum and resettlement policy.

Britain has a very proud history of being a warm and welcoming country for refugees fleeing violence, persecution and oppression, and we are a country that is willing and able to help those in need. About 0.24% of the UK population are refugees and asylum seekers, which is about 169,000 people. I am pleased to say that, over the years, Somerset has of course played its part.

To give just one example, several of the people who escaped from Uganda in the 1970s—they were thrown out by Idi Amin, having been given 90 days to leave with anything they could carry, in a few bags—came to Somerset. Altogether, over 27,000 came to the UK, but some went to camps in Wachet and Yeovil in Somerset, and many of them have stayed in Somerset, living their lives and making their homes in Taunton Deane, which
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[Rebecca Pow]

as we all know is a very fine place to live. We have welcomed them and educated them, and I met one of them who came to my surgery the other day. When I was a news reporter for HTV, I interviewed some of the people who escaped from the terrible war in Kosovo, and we also welcomed them with open arms in the west country.

Today, there is no less a call for humanitarian actions across the globe, and the UK has a commendable record in the middle east. By 2020, 20,000 refugees from Syria will have been resettled in the UK, half of whom have already arrived, so we have a very proud record. As has been mentioned by several colleagues, in 2016 the UK settled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU state, which is a brilliant record. According to Eurostat figures, over a third of people resettled in the EU came to the UK.

To go back to my constituency, the community has really stepped up in taking in refugee family groups. Although Somerset is not an established asylum dispersal area, Somerset County Council has committed to taking dozens of families over the next three years, and I am really proud to support that. The families are taught English, and they have access to counselling and schooling, as well as support to become fully fledged members of the Taunton Deane community, which means attending Brownies, playing football on Saturdays, holding birthday parties and—I am pleased to say with my gardening hat on—adults accessing our local allotments, because many of them want to grow the crops they are used to eating. As I have said, we are very proud to welcome them.

The community in Taunton Deane has been especially welcoming to Syrian families. The charity Christian Help and Action for Refugees in Somerset was established by three churches—Taunton Vineyard, Creech St Michael Baptist, and St Mary Magdalene. CHARIS has successfully worked with the local authority and the Government to resettle a vulnerable Syrian refugee family in Taunton, and it continues to offer the family support now that they have arrived. It trains volunteers in the community to help them, and they are completely engaged with our community. I have met all the church leaders and some of the volunteers, and I really praise them for their dedicated work.

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend is making an important point that has not been much debated today. It is probably inappropriate in this debate to talk about capacity constraints—do we have enough housing, and so on—when accepting refugees into this country, but one thing to which there seems to be no limit on capacity is the willingness of our residents and constituents to welcome refugees. We are hearing that very strongly right across the country. It seems that they are very willing to fill the gaps in areas where the Government, with their resource constraints, cannot always achieve these goals.

Rebecca Pow: I could not reiterate my hon. Friend’s comments more strongly. Just last month, the charity I have been talking about announced that the Home Office had approved the resettling of a second refugee family in Taunton—and they will be very welcome. We must remember the lasting impact that welcoming vulnerable families into the UK may have on our national reputation. A letter from the father of the first refugee family resettled in Taunton from Kurdistan reminds us of this. In his letter, he thanks the “tender and loving” people of the UK and says:

“This beautiful kindness will remain with me until my end”. That fully backs up what my hon. Friend just said.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady not agree that she has succinctly and successfully described the benefit that families together can bring as they try to create a life in this country? All the Bill would do is extend the option for families to be together and to work in constituencies and bring economic benefit to us all.

Rebecca Pow: I think that the hon. Gentleman will find that I agree with much of what he says, and I believe that the Government have a large toolbox of regulations already in place and achieving that, but that is not to say that there is not always the opportunity to have a look and do more, although the Government are already on that case, and I hope they are taking notes today.

Joanna Cherry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rebecca Pow: I am going to press on, because other people want to speak.

Having illustrated how this country is willing to take in people and do its very best for them, I want to touch on the current law. In the last five years, we have granted 24,000 families reunion visas, and these visas are free of charge and free from the eligibility criteria that usually apply to family visa applications. The law ensures that those offered refugee status in Britain can bring their family unit, including their partners and dependent children under 18. Other relations, such as dependent adults, adopted children and post-flight family members, are rightly subject to different visa criteria, such as maintenance funds and knowledge of English. If applicable, however, in the case of dependent children over 18, for example, applications may be granted outside the exemption rules, and in serious circumstances the law allows for extended family members to sponsor children. It is absolutely right that these exemptions are in place and that they be used properly.

Joanna Cherry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rebecca Pow: I am going to press on.

To be clear, a great deal of thought and attention has gone into this system, and the Government are fully committed to implementing section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016. As we have heard, Ministers have visited Greece and Italy to discuss processes, taking into account relevant national laws applicable to the scheme’s implementation. The Government have also invited referrals of eligible children from France, Greece and Italy, and we are working to ensure the safe identification and transfer of eligible children.

In partnership with the UN Refugee Agency, we operate numerous schemes—many have been referred to already—such as the Gateway, Mandate, children at risk and vulnerable persons relocation schemes, to make sure that those in most need can find a secure home.
The children at risk scheme alone will resettle 3,000 children and their families from the middle east and north Africa over this Parliament. In addition, as mentioned, the Government have an ongoing commitment under the Dublin regulation, and we continue to work closely with member states and relevant partners to ensure that children with qualifying family in the UK can be transferred quickly and safely to have their asylum claim determined in the UK.

This country takes its moral obligations very seriously and wants to contribute to making the world a better place, yet it is important that in our generosity we do not inadvertently create circumstances that harm some of our most vulnerable. We do not want to encourage children to undertake dangerous journeys in the hope that relatives can join them later, only to fall prey to human traffickers. Sadly, that happens all too often.

Several hon. Members rose—

Rebecca Pow: I will press on because the hon. Members who wish to intervene have already had their say on this. We all know that, unfortunately, criminal gangs will shamelessly exploit vulnerable people for profit, and we should be careful not to feed such activities in any way. We should reaffirm that international protection must be claimed in the first safe country reached by a refugee. That is the fastest possible route. Current criteria aim to strike the right balance and enable thousands of people each year to be reunited with their families in the UK, without putting the most vulnerable at risk. I am pleased that the Lord Chancellor is undertaking a review of legal aid reforms. That will include an evaluation of changes to the scope of legal aid in immigration cases, and it will report back next year.

Joanna Cherry: Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Rebecca Pow: I will press on because I am being encouraged to conclude my remarks—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Let the hon. Lady have her say, and then I will make up my mind.

Rebecca Pow: I am winding up. Mr Deputy Speaker—[Interruption.] I am winding everybody up, so I will cut to my conclusion.

We need to focus our efforts and humanitarian aid on ensuring peace and stability in the world. People do not want to leave their homes; they want peace. When any of them are asked, they say that what they really want is to stay in their own country, and that is what our country, with its humanitarian aid and overseas spending budget, is determined to help with as its first priority. The UK does not back away from its obligations, and it has pledged £2.46 billion of aid to Syria, and is committed to spending 0.7% of our GDP on international aid.

We must work with our partners across the world and with colleagues across the House, but our answer must strike the right balance between our will to shoulder our humanitarian responsibilities, and not encouraging a situation that would inadvertently cause more suffering. We need to deal with the root causes of the refugee crisis. Crucially, all existing regulations in our toolbox must be used effectively and eloquently—my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) referred to that and I fully support his words.

Finally, as I have said, this Government have a fine record on refugees, but they are fully aware that in some areas that record might be improved. That is why we are reviewing legal aid, and why the Government are listening carefully to NGOs, and others, as part of their commitment to a wider review of our approach to family reunion, asylum and resettlement policy. I know they will continue to build on that approach, which fully supports our humanitarian principles. I welcome the discussion and debate that has ensued today, and I trust that notes are being made by those on the Treasury Bench. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, I will continue to listen to the wider debate, and then I will make up my mind.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We won’t be able to listen to anything if hon. Members carry on for that long.

12.53 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I will try to be brief, Mr Deputy Speaker, because the most important thing today is that this Bill proceeds. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), and to all hon. Members who, unusually, are here on a Friday. This is my fourth debate on a Friday in 13 years, because this Bill matters. It is a chance and a test. It is a test of our support for the people who need it most; it is a test of our ability to act with compassion and common sense. It is not a hard test, because this is a modest and tightly defined common-sense Bill.

Let us be clear what the changes in the Bill would mean for the refugee children who are already here in the United Kingdom. These are children who have experienced unimaginable things. Nevertheless, I want Members to try to imagine. What horrific set of circumstances might have to happen to a family that would mean that the danger and misery of fleeing across land and sea, as well as the risk of separation, is preferable to staying put? Imagine how you would want your children and your family to be treated at the end of your journey. Imagine that sanctuary, and the kindness that goes with it, and be very clear that that must be the model for how we treat families today.

Separated refugee children in the United Kingdom have already overcome threats and danger in their own communities. They have been split from their families in their rush to find somewhere—anywhere—safe and have then been forced through a terrifying journey by sea and land to Europe, journeys that we know have claimed hundreds of children’s lives. These refugee children are here right now living in our communities alongside us, asking us today to step up and reunite them with their families. The Bill will allow them a future with their families. The Bill will allow them a future with their families instead of being separated from them. It will mean children growing up with their parents where they should be, at their side, rather than living with the constant worry about the fate of their families, stranded and out of reach. The Bill simply makes that possible.

Let us not lose sight of who these refugee children are. The biggest groups seeking help in the UK last year were from Eritrea and Sudan, two countries torn apart by generations of civil war and violence. In Eritrea, boys can be conscripted into the army from the age...
of 16, sent off to kill and be killed at the whim of their Government. They are sent away from their families as child conscripts to serve wherever they are posted, cut off from home when they are barely of high school age. In Sudan, hundreds of thousands of families are starved of food and basic medical supplies, and are at the mercy of warring factions on all sides. For many parents and their children, this is how ordinary life has been for years. These are children who have started life with the worst possible deal. Let us today give them a better deal.

The Bill will not just assert the rights of children to sponsor their families to join them, which is itself long overdue; it will bring immigration rules into line with real life. The rules need to be as flexible as families themselves. That parents can be reunited with some but not all of their children, and younger siblings can be brought to safety but their older sisters and brothers may be left behind, are shocking anomalies. At the moment, the rules obsess over age. If a child is the wrong side of their 18th birthday when their parents become refugees, the parents have no right to bring them here. They will be left in danger. Can we agree that common sense and compassion should take the place of pedantry?

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Farron: I am sorry, but I will not give way because we need to get on.

This is not a question of age, but of family. It is difficult to imagine anything more agonising for a parent than to know that they can keep some of their children safe but not all of them. It is ludicrous that that should be in the immigration rules and I welcome the commitment in the Bill to change them. Common sense is missing when it comes to the Home Office stopping any specialist support, as if reunifying refugee families is simple and straightforward. I disagree, of course. Those families need specialist support. I hope that the Bill, and the debate on it, will help us to take another look at the legal aid available when refugees are trying to reunite across continents and war zones.

Layla Moran: Does my hon. Friend agree that we should thank the very many lawyers across the country who work pro bono to help those who need help most?

Tim Farron: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is right.

It is not a simple process when it involves DNA testing and legal wrangling over birth certificates. Many Members will have seen in their constituency surgeries just how complex it can become. Leaving some of the most vulnerable people in our society to navigate the system on their own is deeply unfair.

There is one last reason to commend this Bill: doing the right thing by refugee families just happens also to mean that we do the right thing by our country’s future. After the horrors that these children have endured and escaped from, I want us to think not just of the pain of the past but of the potential of what could come next. These kids are not just the products of their horrific experiences; they will also become part of our shared future. It is in everybody’s interest that refugee children head off into their adult lives confident and integrated into British society, committed to making the most of the opportunities ahead. We all know that the kindest and most effective way of making the best of their futures is to reunite them with their families. So let us pass this Bill, dismiss the excuses and do what is right—support this Bill.

1 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and so many other speeches. I congratulate the Bill’s promoter, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). I have been practising pronouncing his constituency name, but perhaps not for long enough. I, too, understand the difficulties of piloting private Members’ Bills through this House, having got a presentation Bill through to Third Reading, before it fell and failed at that particular hurdle.

It is not my intention to detain the Chamber for a particularly long time. Despite the disappointing cries from the Opposition Benches, there are still one or two points that I want to make. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this serious subject to the Floor of the House, particularly this week with the crisis and war in Syria having entered its eighth year. Parliamentarians also heard this week from the ambassador to Jordan, a country to which many refugees have fled for security. He updated us, telling us that there are 740,000 Syrian refugees and 100,000 others in the camps in Jordan. He also talked about the assessments being made by the UNHCR.

Anna Soubry: Conservative Members have rightly raised a very important point: what happens if an 18-year-old in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan decides to take advantage of this Bill by coming here and then getting his family over? Does my hon. Friend agree that that scenario simply could not happen, because somebody from Syria would be in Jordan as a place of refuge, and if they were then to enter this country illegally, they would not be deemed a refugee, and therefore they could not use this Bill? Does he agree that that dispels concerns raised by hon. Members about the exploitation of this excellent proposed legislation?

Michael Tomlinson: I heard my right hon. Friend mention that point earlier, but I do not think anyone else has done so as yet. I would like to hear from the Minister whether my right hon. Friend’s interpretation is right. The Bill title includes the word “refugees”, so she has raised a perfectly sensible point and I look forward to hearing the answer in detail. I will, however, turn to my concerns about the pull factor, because, despite cries from the Opposition Benches, I think they are legitimate points to raise and I will do so.

Anna Soubry indicated dissent.

Michael Tomlinson: My right hon. Friend pulls a slight face, but I think there are legitimate concerns and I will address them as briefly as possible.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: We have to understand and be very clear that the pull factor cannot happen, because the person has to be deemed to be a refugee. All we are doing is giving under-18s in general the same rights as adults. If the pull factor is anywhere, it is with adults who can come legally, but the pull factor just does not and will not exist—the hon. Gentleman has to move
away from it—because the person has to be a refugee. The Bill applies only to refugees and the Government will grant that.

Michael Tomlinson: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, which is similar to that made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), which I answered. I still want to address the concern, because people have raised it with me.

Joanna Cherry: Has the hon. Gentleman read the House of Lords EU Committee’s 2016 report? The Committee found absolutely no evidence to support this argument about the pull factor. On the contrary, it said that if there was a pull factor of the kind that the hon. Gentleman has described, one would expect to see evidence of it in other EU member states that participate in the-family reunification directive, and there is no such evidence. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should proceed on the basis of evidence, not myth?

Michael Tomlinson: I can give two answers to that question. First, no, I have not seen the report, but I did hear the hon. and learned Lady’s intervention—[Interruption.] I think it is worth my answering her question, and perhaps she can listen to my answer rather than heckling me at the outset.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put. The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Will the Serjeant at Arms please investigate the blockage in the move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

The House divided: Ayes 129, Noes 42.

Division No. 133] [1.5 pm

AYES

Abott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Bandell, Hannah
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blomfield, Paul
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Cresay, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Mr Jim

Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hendry, Drew
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hosie, Stewart
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jones, Sarah
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Aftzal
Killen, Ged
Laird, Lesley
Lammy, rh Mr David
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Nandy, Lisa
Neil, Robert
Newlands, Gavin
O’Hara, Brendan
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert

Argar, Edward
Baker, Mr Steve
Bebb, Guto
Bowie, Andrew
Burt, rh Alistair
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Mims
Dinahane, Caroline
Donelan, Michelle
Dowden, Oliver
Eustice, George
Foster, Kevin
Frazer, Lucy
Gibb, rh Nick
Green, Chris
Griffiths, Andrew
Hall, Luke
Harris, Rebecca
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hinds, rh Damian
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Lopresti, Jack

Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Qureshi, Yasmin
Reed, Mr Steve
Reeves, Ellie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sheppard, Tommy
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Henry
Sobel, Alex
Soubry, rh Anna
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Timms, rh Stephen
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad

Tellers for the Ayes: David Linden and Alison Thewliss

NOES

Malthouse, Kit
Maynard, Paul
Merriman, Huw
Milling, Amanda
Morris, David
Nokes, rh Caroline
Opperman, Guy
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Pow, Rebecca
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Robinson, Mary
Stephenson, Andrew
Stewart, Bob
Sunak, Rishi
Tomlinson, Michael
Warburton, David

Tellers for the Noes: Mike Freer and Wendy Morton

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.
Unpaid Trial Work Periods (Prohibition) Bill

Second Reading

1.21 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I wish to begin by thanking all the hon. Members who sponsored the Bill at its outset. I also thank the many organisations and people—the Scottish Trades Union Congress, the Better than Zero campaign, Thompsons Solicitors, Jolyon Maugham, QC, and various others—who have taken the time to support its drafting. I would like to mention one person above all others, if you will indulge me, Mr Deputy Speaker, and that is my magnificent researcher Keith Thomson. He has pulled a shift and a half—a paid shift and a half—to ensure that the Bill made it to the Floor of the House this afternoon.

Right hon. and hon. Members will know that the Bill enjoys support from all the parties in this House, with the exception of the Democratic Unionist party, but I do not wish to dwell on that lowly fact at the moment; unfortunately, my overdraft did not extend to that which Her Majesty’s Treasury enjoys. Right hon. and hon. Members will also know that yesterday the polling company YouGov published a poll showing that 65% of the public believe that unpaid trial work is unfair; a clear majority of people across the UK are looking for this Parliament to do what it has to do in correcting the law as it currently stands. That is the opportunity that sits before us. [ Interruption. ] Did the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) wish to say something? It is unlike him—

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I will certainly give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I will congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing this Bill. Time is short, and we know how Friday shenanigans can sometimes work. Given the high level of public and cross-party support, it is incumbent on the Government and, in particular, Conservative Back Benchers, to make sure that this Bill passes its Second Reading before we adjourn.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman knows, as do Conservative Members, that I wish to be a constructive voice in this Parliament while I am here. I think this is a good Bill. Some people may see it as not a perfect one, which is why it should go to Committee, so that we can make good law. If we are not here as legislators to make good law, what on earth is the point of this Parliament? Although my political career rests on that question, while I am here I would like to make some use of the time and so I agree with what he has to say. With support from Members from across the Benches and with great support enjoyed among the public, we should give the Bill a Second Reading.

I wish to adumbrate for Members why I believe, as do so many others, that the law needs to be changed. As I understand it, the Government’s view is that unpaid trial shifts are already unlawful and that such practices are covered by the National Minimum Wage Act 1998. It is 20 years old this year and undoubtedly a fine piece of legislation, but it is insufficient when it comes to dealing with unpaid trial shifts, although I do not think it was meant to be. We have the opportunity to put it right.

In 20 years of the 1998 Act, there has not been a single tribunal or a single fine issued. There has not been a single prosecution, naming and shaming or ticking off of anyone for the use of an unpaid trial shift. That feeds into the fact that the Government, the courts and the trade unions do not hold any statistics on unpaid trial shifts. Nevertheless, we all know that they happen.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I think I support the Bill, but will the hon. Gentleman clarify that it will apply only to an unpaid trial for a job, and not to an unpaid sixth-former helping in a Member’s office for a while?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Every sixth-former should have the chance to do work experience in the hon. Gentleman’s office and I would not dream of seeking to rob any of them of the ability to do that. On a serious note, the Bill is not about work experience, which is a good thing. It does not concern itself with volunteering, which is also a good thing. The Bill does not concern itself with internships, because that would require specific legislation, but I shall return to them, because the Minister announced a Government initiative on them earlier in the year.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman’s speech. Following on from the point made by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), how do we sort out the situation wherein someone comes in for work experience and is subsequently employed, because that can happen? It is a good thing for someone to come into an office environment, enjoy the role—it works—and then subsequently get employed some weeks or months later. How do we ensure that we do not penalise employers in those circumstances?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has read the Bill—I know him to be diligent and I am sure that he has—but I shall come to how we split that out and ensure that there are no crossed wires.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that unfortunately, in perhaps only a small number of companies, one trialist is replaced by another and then another, and so on? Those companies use trial shifts as a way of getting free work.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman anticipates where my speech is about to go, but to come back to the point made by the hon. Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), in the hospitality and retail sectors, where this practice is known to be widespread—it is by no means exclusive to those sectors, but it does happen in them rather a lot—there is a difference between a person applying for a job to be, for example, a barista in a coffee shop or a cocktail maker in a hotel bar, and their demonstrating that they can do the things that they have said they can do, which is fine, and a trial shift
in which the applicant is asked to work alongside someone on a paid shift, doing the same job as them, but is not paid.

The Government think that the existing law is sufficient to deal with and prevent that kind of thing from happening but, as the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) said, all too often a company advertises an unpaid trial shift, and in some cases it might be two or three hours, but in some of the more extreme cases, including the case that first brought this issue to my attention, it is 40 hours. Yesterday, the BBC interviewed someone who had done four weeks of unpaid trial work. Here is the deeply cynical element: in a lot of cases, there is not actually a job to give the person—it is about covering sickness, staff shortages, busy periods over Christmas or wedding seasons in hotels. That is where the law is insufficient to prevent gross exploitation.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I hugely commend my hon. Friend for introducing this Bill and for the strong and erudite way he is presenting it. It is not the greatest tragedy of trial shifts that most often the people who are exploited have learning disabilities? They are desperate for work and see these shifts as their only opportunity. That is a key reason why the Bill must be passed.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Too often that is what happens. The people who fall victim either do not know their rights and cannot stand up for them, or are unwilling to challenge employers on their rights because they are in fear of losing their job. This practice hits the lowest paid and the lowest skilled in our economy, and this is a Bill to protect the lowest paid and the lowest skilled in our economy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am overcome with Members’ generosity.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is being extremely gracious. I congratulate him—as I am sure do most Members in this House—on bringing this Bill before us today. We have just had National Apprenticeship Week. Not least of the evils of the present situation, is that, first, it prevents the sort of example, the Conservative-led coalition, of two Parliaments ago now, changed employment law so that people can effectively be dismissed in the first two years of employment. That is something that I disagree with; I would not have voted for that. None the less, with those kind of instruments at employers’ disposal, there is no need to try people out for 10 hours, 40 hours, or four weeks, as I mentioned earlier.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Does he agree that working conditions are deteriorating? I have known sons and daughters—I have known many people—who have suffered the abuse of unpaid work. That is why I strongly support the trade union movement. I suggest that everybody should get into the trade union movement to stop the abuse of workers. If the Tory Prime Minister was prepared to put money where her mouth is, she would support these workers and stop this practice.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point. There is an important message there that I know the Scottish Trades Union Congress would wish me to send: workers who are affected by this practice, and those who are not, should join trade unions. The prohibitive problem is that, where people are in that kind of precarious work, it is financially difficult to sustain a trade union membership. This Bill will help to give some protection and some security to people who badly need it; the hon. Gentleman is right on that point.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise Unite community section, which has low rates specifically to protect those people who are out of work? There are options in the union sector to protect people who are on low wages or no wage.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I commend that point. When I first floated the idea of the Bill, I recall receiving an email from Unite, saying, “Stewart, we need to talk.” I realised that that would cause a shiver to run up the spines of Labour members; it caused one to run up mine, too.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Surely to goodness, there is not anyone on a Bench here in this House who thinks that that kind of practice can be justified.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con) indicated assent.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I see that the hon. Gentleman is nodding, and thank goodness for that. I thank him, too, for his support for the Bill—he was actually a very early supporter of it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) is absolutely right. I argue, as I am sure that he, as a man with fine trade union credentials that would be tough to challenge on these Benches, does too, that employment law is heavily stacked in favour of the employer. It actually provides employers with sufficient instruments to try people out as it is. Why can people not be put on a probation period, as is normal in most mainstream jobs where good employers do that? For example, the Conservative-led coalition, of two Parliaments ago now, changed employment law so that people can effectively be dismissed in the first two years of employment.

Stephen Kerr: I see that, too.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: That is something that I disagree with; I would not have voted for that. None the less, with those kind of instruments at employers’ disposal, there is no need to try people out for 10 hours, 40 hours, or four weeks, as I mentioned earlier.
[Stewart Malcolm McDonald]

We had a very fruitful conversation. Unite has been immensely supportive, and I would mention in particular one of its Scottish organisers, Bryan Simpson.

The Better Than Zero movement has collated lots of information—way more than I have—on precarious work and unpaid trial shifts. It has also taken some direct action against rogue employers, who get up to all sorts of things such as stealing tips from part-time staff and all the rest of it. There is a lot to sort out. Although this Bill does not deal with all of it, I hope that we can all agree that it deals with an important element.

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this practice of abuse is carried out by some of the biggest and best-known employers in the country, which often put unrealistic productivity targets on their staff that are almost forcing them to use any method they can to get home before midnight?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: This may be the only time that I have looked forward to using my parliamentary privilege: I am going to name some companies that have come up when I have had this conversation with people.

The first company that came up was Mooboo Bubble Tea. I understand why there are confused looks on some Members’ faces because I do not know what bubble tea is either, but I can tell hon. Members that I do not say that the case was resolved. I said that I do not know the outcome, because the then Minister told me that she would not actually get told the outcome of the case. Now, I have not found any available positions that I could perhaps have applied for myself, under cloak and dagger, in order to work out what happens. I do, though, understand that Aldi opened a big new store in the north-east of Scotland, advertising 150 unpaid trial shifts. This cannot go on, and today we have a chance to end it.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I quite agree with the hon. Gentleman that this case is a shocking example of abuse. Did he report the matter to HMRC for investigation? If he did, will he update the House on the outcome?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Yes, I did. I sent a letter to the former HMRC Minister, Jane Ellison, who I think is now employed by the Government as a special adviser. [Interruption.] Forgive me, I may have got that wrong. Jane Ellison did deal with the case for me at the time. I had a conversation with her on one of the few occasions that we were in the same Lobby, and she assured me that my complaint was passed on to the right people. Part of the problem with raising an issue via a Minister, rather than directly to the unit, is that we do not actually get told the outcome of the investigation.

If hon. Members come across cases where there is any question that the definition of the national minimum wage has been abused, I encourage them to report the situation to HMRC. I did a Facebook Live broadcast with House of Commons digital officials earlier this week, and I gave lots of examples from members of the public who have gone through such things. People rely on the National Minimum Wage Act 1998, and the low paid rely on it more than any other group in society, so it needs to be enforced with rigour.

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): If the hon. Gentleman was able to take the case he mentioned to HMRC and it was resolved, why is there a need for new legislation?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Forgive me, but I did not say that the case was resolved. I said that I do not know the outcome, because the then Minister told me that she would not actually get told the outcome of such cases.

After blocking Members of Parliament on social media who highlighted the issue and then unbloking them all later that day, Mooboo Bubble Tea sent me a letter to say that the activity carried out in my constituent’s case was actually training. Training is actually covered by the National Minimum Wage Act, so Mooboo was still in breach of the law if that were the case. The company did, however, tell me that it had changed its practice as a result. Now, I have not found any available positions that I could perhaps have applied for myself, under cloak and dagger, in order to work out what happens. I do, though, understand that Aldi opened a big new store in the north-east of Scotland, advertising 150 unpaid trial shifts. This cannot go on, and today we have a chance to end it.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this Bill forward. He just mentioned training, which I know about from personal experience. My son Dylan undertook unpaid training with a company that is employed by charities. It was to be a week’s unpaid training with a view to a job at the end. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is terrible that charities, which are supposed to exist to raise money for the greater good, are exploiting people in this way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I did not even know that he had a son called Dylan.

Alan Brown: He doesn’t admit it to me!

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am sure that is untrue. I mentioned retail and hospitality because those were the industries that came up most in my consultation. Amazingly, the British Retail Consortium refused even to discuss the issue with me because it thought there was not a problem. That is news to a young man from North Lanarkshire who was abused by the retail store, B&M Bargains. I used to love going into B&M Bargains, perhaps to pick up some toothpaste and then spending 25 quid because it is the kind of shop where people buy things they do not need. I was horrified to learn that it had had a young man with autism, in the hope of securing work, stacking shelves for three or four days, only to dismiss him at the end of it, saying, “You’re not required any more—off you go”, with no pay and no chance of a response.

Stephen Kerr: What interests me is the demoralising effect of that situation on that individual. It is this devil-may-care attitude towards other people that really gets under my skin. This Bill is about fairness, and I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing it forward.
Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who has been a great supporter of the Bill from the outset and has had good input into it too. He is right—it is a deeply horrifying and cynical practice. Imagine if that was your first introduction to the world of work: how would it make you feel about trying to secure work for yourself in future? I think we are all united in believing that it is a good thing when people want to go out there and secure work of some kind.

Neil Gray: The worst part of that story was that my constituent was rota-ed to be in that work the following week, which gave him the impression that he had in fact secured the job. He was told, on the last day possible, that he had not applied enough effort, which was clearly wrong. That type of behaviour is utterly shameful and must be called out.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I did not know that additional detail. It is shamefully, and it is right to call it out. It is the last time that I will be being in not in B&M, which is a great shame because I pass it on the way to my constituency office every day. Let me say that I mean no malice to the workers of that company but instead the bosses who allow that kind of practice to go on.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I fully support this Bill, as I have from the outset. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that as well as the fact that this work is unpaid, there is great danger with regard to health and safety, training, other staff members, and members of the public? Unscrupulous employers are putting everybody in danger, and also damaging the reputation of the good employers who do not engage in this.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. He has been a fine supporter of the Bill—a sponsor, no less. He is right. Not everyone does this, and those who do give good employers a bad name. That is why I made the point in response to the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) about the damage this will do in people’s minds if it is their first experience of the world of work.

I want to square up what the Bill does and why it does it. It is essentially split into two main parts. The first part amends the National Minimum Wage Act 1998. It makes it clear that where someone takes part in a trial shift—it defines what a “trial shift” is—they are to be paid at least the national minimum wage, and that the Bill applies right across the United Kingdom.

I have put in some safeguards based on the feedback I have had from members of the public, as I have been discussing. First, when a member of the public is offered a trial shift, it is to be made clear to them in writing how long it will last so that people cannot be strung along. It will also be made clear how many jobs actually exist. That should put an end to the practice of offering “ghost” shifts where no job actually exists.

Secondly, the person and the employer are to have an agreement that proper feedback is going to be received. In one case, a person—I will not identify them but it was the daughter of a prominent Scottish Labour politician—went on a trial shift in a bar, worked three or four shifts, and at the end of it the employer said to her, “We’re not taking you on—you don’t have enough experience.” They already knew that from looking at her CV at the application stage.

We have to try to empower applicants a bit, because people are feeling helpless. This is not about ending trials or the ability of an employer to test someone; it is just about ending the ability to take someone for a ride and pay them nothing.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this important Bill forward. I was not really aware of this issue until, when my eldest son was a teenager, a couple of his friends worked several unpaid shifts in a restaurant. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is particularly rife in the hospitality industry, which many of us partake of and spend money in? If people were more aware of the issue and the need to plug the hole in existing employment legislation, they would support the Bill. Should not all Members support the Bill?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Yes, I do believe that. What the hon. Lady says is funny; I have put a name on it—I have called it an unpaid trial shift. Most folk would say, “What on earth is that?” but when I explain it, they realise that their own kids have done it, their neighbours’ kids have done it or their nieces and nephews have done it. Everybody knows somebody who has done it.

On hospitality, I will say this. I had a very constructive meeting with the British Hospitality Association, which supports measures such as this because it wants the industry to be seen as an attractive place to work and build a career in. Anything this Parliament can do to help hospitality or other sectors can only be a good thing.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I know that the hon. Gentleman has an interest in hospitality, so I will give way.

Nigel Huddleston: Not any more, I am afraid. I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is making some really important points. I am glad he recognises that the hospitality and leisure industry, which employs about 3 million people in the UK, has good and bad practices, but they are generally good. That is important to recognise.

First, I think we are hearing a clear message from this House to the Minister that, depending on how the Bill progresses today, we need to make sure existing legislation works properly, because that is one of the gaps. Secondly, on the great Tory philosophy of “make work pay”, anybody who makes anybody work must make sure they pay them.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I never thought I would bring forward a Bill that encompasses Tory philosophy, but this is a Bill that makes work pay. I hope the hon. Gentleman will do everything in the short time left to make sure the Bill proceeds.
[Stewart Malcolm McDonald]

I want to bring my remarks to a close, to allow others to say what they wish. The hon. Gentleman’s first point was about whether the law works or not. I do not believe it does, but the Government do. I know that because they have made public statements and because I have had conversations with the Minister. I do not believe the law works, and the legal advice I have suggests that it does not. The trade unions do not believe it does. I shared all that advice with the Government after they asked for it and had no issue in doing so, but it does not seem to have changed their mind. If the law did work, there would have been one tribunal in 20 years of the law that the Minister says covers this, but there has not been. That, in itself, tells me that the law does not work.

I know the Minister believes that the law covers trial shifts and unpaid internships. He said to me, “Stewart, we have no wish to derail your Bill, but we think the law covers it already.” Let us split that proposition, because those two things cannot sit comfortably together. If the law as it stands covers this—if the Minister listens, I can educate him—there is a problem for the Minister, because I have found on the w4mp website an unpaid internship from 2012 in his office for three to six months.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths) rose—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I will allow the Minister to respond; he does not need to get too excited. If it is the case that the law as it stands bans unpaid shifts and unpaid internships, either he has to refer himself to HMRC, or I am afraid I will have to do it for him.

Andrew Griffiths: I would be very interested to see that. I have never, ever had an unpaid internship in my office.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I can assure the Minister—I will send it to him when the debate concludes—that there is an unpaid internship advert on the w4mp website. I checked it just before the debate started and am happy to let him see it. I think he is looking it up as I make this point, but I assure him it is there. That is something that many parties in the House take part in. I think internships are enormously valuable, but if the Minister is so convinced that the law as it stands is functional, that raises questions for what he and others have done.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his work on the Bill. As the youngest Labour party Member of this place, it would be remiss of me not to mention the adverse effect of unpaid trial shifts on young people. Does he agree that young people are massively affected, and given that they may not have the mechanisms available to older workers, will he join me in calling on all young people to join a trade union?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Lady is right, and I join her in calling on all young people to join a trade union. I should mention that, as I am sure she will know, the Scottish Youth Parliament has endorsed the Bill, and a fine job it made of that.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): In the light of the information that my hon. Friend has given, will he place a copy of it in the Library of the House so that all Members can familiarise themselves with it? That is a very interesting point.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am happy to place that information in the Library, although I rather suspect that it will find its way on to Twitter soon enough.

In closing—I do not wish to cheat the Minister out of his time—this is a Bill that makes work pay and that empowers people who, as the hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) said, need empowerment. This is supposed to be a Parliament of legislators that makes good law. I believe we have an opportunity today to make good law, so let us not filibuster, kill it or somehow ensure that it cannot pass. I realise that is looking tough, but stranger miracles have happened. I ask Members to get behind the Bill, and to get it into Committee. Let us make good law and protect people who need protecting.

1.51 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the very thoughtful, well-researched and well-considered speech by the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). I must say that I found myself in agreement with large parts of it, partly because I am a very passionate believer in the national minimum wage.

One of the things I did after I was first elected in 2015 was to seek out the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne—I understand he is more than modestly occupied these days—to press him on what I thought was the very strong case for a big increase in the minimum wage, because it is so important, and I was delighted when, a short time later, the Government announced large increases in the minimum wage. I am very proud of the fact that a Conservative Government, between 2010 and today, have increased the minimum wage from £5.93 an hour back in 2010 to £7.83 an hour today, which is a 32% increase. The national living wage is a legally required minimum wage, and I am very proud that a Conservative Government have increased it by 32%. Over that period, inflation has been only 19%, so it has risen by substantially more than inflation.

Stephen Kerr: Does my hon. Friend accept that the premise of the Bill is that it is a wonderful thing to learn to work, which is a very important part of growing up? The Bill is particularly about protecting the young, however, so is it not an important lesson for the young to learn that if they go to work and they work hard, they are also entitled to be paid fairly?

Chris Philp: Yes, I agree with that principle. As my hon. Friend pointed out in his earlier intervention, the idea that people should be fairly paid for a fair day’s work, or even for a fair few hours’ work, is an important Conservative principle, and I think it is an important fundamental right as well, so I agree entirely with that premise.

I want to put on the record once again my very strong support for the concept of the minimum wage—the national living wage—and the fact that it has been increased by such a large amount. While talking about
wages for those on low earnings, I would point out in passing that the increase in the tax-free allowance in the past few years—from £6,500 to £11,500—means that take-home wages for people on the minimum wage, the topic of the Bill, have actually gone up by 37%, because not only has the minimum wage gone up by 32%, but they are also paying proportionately less tax. It is important to bear it in mind that low tax, as well as a decent wage itself, has a role to play in making sure people are properly paid.

We have talked quite a bit already about enforcement. Clearly, a national minimum wage, or national living wage, is only as effective as its enforcement, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South touched on. In the last financial year, 2016-17, HMRC, the body responsible for enforcing the national minimum wage, took action against 1,134 individual businesses—quite a good track record of taking action to enforce the minimum wage; clawed back £10.9 million—a fairly substantial sum; and took action that encompassed 98,000 workers who had been illegally underpaid. That suggests that HMRC is taking its enforcement role very seriously and enjoying some success in making sure that the national living wage and minimum wage are adhered to.

Bob Stewart: Just to clarify, HMRC did not keep the money but presumably gave it to those who had lost it. Is that right?

Chris Philp: When someone has been illegally underpaid, I believe that they receive retrospective compensation. As to where the funds go, I rather suspect they end up with Her Majesty’s Treasury, but certainly the unfair

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amount of trial work, by which one might mean a few hours. I would consider three or four hours to be the maximum amount of time considered reasonable, and it could be unfair to impose on those businesses the administration involved in setting up payroll, PAYE, national insurance, a return to HMRC and so on, for a short and reasonable period of trial work.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman knows about other instruments that exist for employers, and someone's skills can be tested. If he applies to work at my coffee shop and I ask him to prove that he can make a cappuccino, he will do what he has to do, and I will be satisfied with that. I do not need to put him on a shift with the rest of my staff and have him working alongside other colleagues, serving customers and contributing to my profit margin without payment.

Chris Philp: As we have discussed previously, that would be wholly unreasonable for an entire eight-hour shift. However, a trial for an hour, testing someone serving coffee in a live work environment, for example, gives the potential employer information about that person's suitability. In the coffee shop example, I would consider it reasonable to have someone work for one hour as a trial and not require payment. Working an eight-hour shift would and should require full payment. My concern is that the one-hour trial would get caught by the Bill as drafted.

Neil Gray: I am pretty sure that Members who are employers will have it written into their contracts that all staff start with a probationary period. Is that not a more appropriate way to handle this matter?

Chris Philp: I am not sure that it is. If someone is taken on as an employee for a probationary period, the reasonable expectation is for them to work with the company for a few months—a probationary period is typically at least one month, and in some cases three. Asking an employer to employ for between one and three months someone who, it transpires after a few hours, is unsuitable is a little unfair on the employer.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Philp: I am spoilt for choice, but I will first give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall).

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that some people are much more comfortable doing a trial period of one hour than they are sitting through an interview of 45 minutes, which they might find extremely stressful and uncomfortable, and for which they might be unprepared?

Chris Philp: I agree with that point. I set up and ran my own businesses for 15 years before being elected, and found that often interviews are not a very good way of ascertaining someone’s suitability. People can come up with all sorts of nonsense, but if they get to do the job in some way, even for a short period such as an hour, the employer learns a lot about their capability.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I appreciate the point about the coffee shop and the mechanical process of producing coffee, but would my hon. Friend accept that a far more subtle process is needed to assess social skills before an offer of employment is made?

Chris Philp: I agree that it is a subtle process.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Would you work for free?

Chris Philp: In a sense, all of us here have done a gigantic free trial shift: it is called being a parliamentary candidate. I was first selected in December 2006 and ran in the 2010 election. I then proceeded to lose by 42 votes, so that was a pretty extended unsuccessful four-year unpaid trial period.

Michelle Donelan: Does my hon. Friend agree that a trial period can be beneficial for those trying out for a job, so they can see if they want and like the job? When I was younger, I did a trial period for a few hours. This is about getting the balance right between rights and responsibilities. We do not want to exploit anybody; we want to create and facilitate opportunities and jobs.

Chris Philp: A short trial period—just be clear again, I mean one to two hours—can give an employer the confidence to give someone a job, perhaps someone from a disadvantaged background who does not necessarily come across very strongly in interview. That might give an employer the confidence to employ that person when they might not otherwise do so.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I wonder if the hon. Gentleman can clarify something for me. I am listening very carefully to what he says, but I cannot understand why there have to be unpaid trial shifts when it would be much fairer just to put somebody on a temporary contract, then assess them and decide whether to give them a permanent contract.

Chris Philp: To be absolutely clear, I do not think that full, unpaid trial shifts are ethical, right or moral. My understanding is that they are illegal already, and if they are not illegal they certainly should be made so. I definitely do not want full, unpaid trial shifts to be legal. However, a short period of time—one or two hours, I would suggest—should not require a temporary contract. Asking someone to enter into a temporary contract entails a certain amount of paperwork and bureaucracy. Notwithstanding the point about the two years, in relation to discrimination it creates immediately binding legal obligations. To do all that for someone who is essentially going through an interview process imposes an unreasonable burden on a prospective employer. If an employer is interviewing 10 people for one position, to have to give all 10 a temporary contract would be excessive in the context of a one or two-hour trial.

I have spoken for a little bit longer than I planned to. Before I conclude, I will take one last intervention.

Jeremy Quin: My hon. Friend referred to his time as a parliamentary candidate. As we all know, as a parliamentary candidate one receives a lot of feedback whether we like it or not. One of the powerful points made by the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald)
in his excellent speech was in relation to feedback from employers to prospective employees, an excellent idea that should be encouraged. I worry that companies are very nervous about providing honest and helpful feedback. If the Bill moves on to the Committee stage, I hope—as a former employer—that that point is focused on so that a safe harbour can be established.

Chris Philp: I agree. We heard from the Scottish National party Benches about a powerful case study. It is a gross discourtesy—an insult, in fact—to interview someone, have them go to the trouble of coming to your place of work, going through an interview and possibly doing some trial work, and not even provide feedback for them. That discourages people from going to interviews.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: If the Bill does not get a Second Reading and go on to Committee, that will continue to happen. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Bill should go on to the Committee stage?

Chris Philp: I have a very open mind. I would like to hear what the Minister has to say in response to the questions I have posed, in particular on whether one or two hours of work is part of current legislation.

In conclusion, there is a balance to strike. If we impose too many barriers to creating employment—this applies to generally onerous employment legislation—there is a risk that rather than protecting people, we prevent jobs from being created. One of the reasons why this country has created 3 million jobs in the past eight years—more than the rest of Europe put together—is that we have a sensible balance between protections for workers on the one hand and avoiding over-burdening employers on the other. I am very nervous about upsetting that delicate balance.

As I said at the beginning, I agree that practices relating to full shifts in this context should not be lawful. I will listen very carefully to the Minister’s comments when he winds up the debate.

2.9 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): May I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on bringing this important and well-constructed Bill to the House? We have perhaps been diverted towards the issue of people not being paid for one or two hours’ work, but essentially the Bill is about the principle of a fair day’s shift and unpaid. That was combined with a full day’s shift against four other candidates for a job. It was a full experience of the world of work was an unpaid trial shift against four other candidates for a job. It was a full day’s shift and unpaid. That was combined with a full day’s shift and unpaid. That was combined with a full day’s shift and unpaid. That was combined with a full day’s shift and unpaid. That was combined with a full day’s shift and unpaid. That was combined with a full day’s shift and unpaid.

In recent years we have witnessed an explosion of exploitative working practices associated with the so-called “gig economy”, a commonplace phrase that does not do justice to what is really occurring, namely the avoidance of employment rights, benefits and remuneration on a mass scale. Unpaid work trials must be seen in the broader context of a range of sharp practices associated with low paid, insecure employment in this country, designed to cut the burden on the employer at the expense of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of workers.

Just in the past few weeks this place, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, has discussed tipping practices that take rightfully earned tips from waiting staff and recycle them to top up the pay of other workers to the level of the minimum wage. In the past two weeks we have seen how major, international companies such as Wagamama and TGI Fridays have failed to pay their staff the minimum wage.

Luke Hall: Does the hon. Gentleman share my shock and concern that the British Retail Consortium failed to acknowledge that that was even a problem and refused to even meet the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) to discuss the matter?

Dr Whitehead: Yes, I share the hon. Gentleman’s shock and concern. That underlines how a number of very important institutions in this country continue to underestimate and even turn a blind eye to all such practices associated with the gig economy, one of which is unpaid work trials. There is a pattern and it has not been clearly addressed by the Taylor review, and it certainly has not been addressed by the Government’s weak response to that review.

More than £1 billion is lost in wages every year through unpaid work, and the continuing practice of unpaid work trials is a contributing factor to that.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I think I know the report to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but a subsequent report adumbrates that about £3 billion is lost in wages every year.

Dr Whitehead: Obviously, £2 billion has been lost since I last looked. That underlines the big picture. Unite the Union says that there has been a sixfold increase in complaints about the practice in the past three years. Indeed, the personal stories of exploitation collected by the hon. Gentleman chime with many of us, as we have heard today, through the experiences of our constituents, our own children and our local communities.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): As the second youngest Labour Member in the House, I can speak from relatively recent experience. My first experience of the world of work was an unpaid trial shift against four other candidates for a job. It was a full day’s shift and unpaid. That was combined with a zero-hours contract and unfair tipping practices whereby we were never given our tips and they were used to subsidise the minimum wage. Moreover, young people are unaware of trade union rights, how to join a trade union or how to engage in that sort of security in employment. That is the root cause of the problem. It is the duty of this Parliament to legislate for and protect our young people and others who are exploited by such nefarious practices.

Dr Whitehead: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He seems to have personally experienced all the various aspects of this problem: they came together on one occasion, in one place and happened to one person.

Many people have talked about their own experiences. One example comes, in fact, from Scotland. K from Kilmarnock says:

“My son was asked to do a trial shift in our local restaurant. The manager who was on shift did not even speak to him when he was in! He was left in the bar with no direction and when he tried to help the others he was told to get back behind the bar!”
He wasn’t paid a penny for his time. The same restaurant had already done the same thing to a friend of mine’s son except it was for a kitchen porter and he did 4 hours, no pay and again at end of his shift he just left waited over a week with no job offered.”

The use of unpaid trial shifts is a real problem under the current legislation. The concept of “shadowing” has been used by employers to justify bringing in unpaid workers to cover staff shortages, sickness, or particularly busy periods and events. There is a need to clarify the legal position for employees and employers with legislation, and the Bill seeks to do that by closing current legislative loopholes to ensure that workers are paid for every hour they work and every shift they do.

Bob Stewart: I think that what the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) has put together is excellent, and I congratulate him. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp). “Souths” seem to be in the air today!

Can it be made absolutely clear that the Bill will not apply to someone who goes along to have a taster for a day, does not necessarily work a shift, but just gets an experience of what the work is like? That is not what the Bill is about, is it?

Dr Whitehead: My clear understanding, which I think will be borne out by the hon. Member for Glasgow South, is that that is not what the Bill is about. It is not about work experience, or any of the other factors that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned.

Andrew Griffiths: May I clarify the position? As drafted, the Bill would exclude those factors. Anything, including making the coffee, briefly, would be outlawed. The Bill sets the threshold at zero. Any moment spent working would be caught by it.

Dr Whitehead: I am not sure, if I may say so, that the Minister has correctly put across the idea of what “working” is. Various activities that do not actually constitute work, but constitute other activities not related to work, would not be covered by the Bill. When what is clearly work is being undertaken, and that work is recognised in the normal sense of the word, it will be covered.

Andrew Griffiths: May I clarify the position again for the hon. Gentleman? That kind of trial, or test, would not be covered by the national minimum wage, so the payment would not be applicable anyway.

Dr Whitehead: I am not sure if the hon. Gentleman does not understand. If, indeed, methods are being sought to hide work—defined as serious work, which I am sure the hon. Lady agrees the arrangements she mentions would not be—they should get paid for it. It is as simple as that.

Mr Sweeney: There is a world of difference between an exploitative unpaid trial shift in a casualised context such as I experienced in my first job, and going to a controlled and time-bound assessment centre, which took a full day, as I did for my first graduate job, where it was controlled and defined. The Bill seeks to define that difference, and the Government should support it.

Dr Whitehead: Of course there is a difference, and this Bill does not fundamentally change that position: it is my understanding that it seeks to clarify what it is to actually do work and, following that definition, get paid for that work. The principle is that if someone does work—defined as serious work, which I am sure the hon. Lady agrees the arrangements she mentions would not be—they should get paid for it. It is as simple as that.

Michelle Donelan: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that there is a difference between exploiting people by employing them to do shifts when jobs do not exist, and trying people out for an hour or two and giving them an opportunity to prove themselves?

Dr Whitehead: After years of diminution of workers’ rights, that will simply to cut staff costs. There is an element of coercion as well. A widespread response to the call for evidence was that many people who had undertaken unpaid work trials in felt that they could not refuse to do so or speak up because of a fear of jeopardising their chances of getting a job.
offer Labour’s full support for this Bill, to deal with this particularly unjust form of exploitation, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) mentioned, affects so many young people across the country at the start of their working lives. It gives them the impression that the world is perhaps stacked against them in their working career. If only for that reason, we need to ensure that this Bill progresses today.

Andrew Griffiths: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I clarify something? The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) mentioned an advert for an unpaid internship. I can confirm that that position was never filled; it was advertised, but never filled. I am, however, reminded that a paid researcher worked for me for, I think, a brief 20 days of internship with travel expenses paid before she took on the role as a full-paid researcher. It was so brief that it had slipped my mind, but I apologise if I misled the House in any way.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The hon. Gentleman has done exactly the right thing by clarifying that as quickly as possible and putting the record straight.

2.23 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on bringing this Bill before the House. This subject is a fascinating area to explore, and I speak as somebody who has had rather a lot of experience in the jobs market: before being an ornament on these green Benches I was lucky enough to build up a business, before that I enjoyed many years as a teacher, and before all that I did just about everything. I sold sandwiches office to office, I drove a delivery van around London, I cleaned carpets, worked in a nightclub, spent years working in retail, worked as a cleaner, a restaurant pianist—[Interruption.] Oh, yes. I also worked as a very nervous bouncer; you name it, I’ve done it. So I have been a regular paid worker, a casual worker, a zero-hours worker and, like many of us, I have also been a volunteer worker.

For many of those jobs I was expected, quite reasonably, to work a trial shift. It was nothing major or long-lasting; just a test of my limited abilities. Some of those trials were paid, but some were not. It would be just about possible for an unscrupulous employer to work out a way of getting people to work unpaid on an ongoing basis, but they would have to devise a very complicated and convoluted system involving many different workers. Also, that is already illegal, because currently all employers, including many of my former employers, must use only legitimate recruitment practices and tests. In some areas that could include a trial shift, but it must not be excessive in length.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Does the hon. Gentleman intend to talk the Bill out?

David Warburton: Certainly not; I am going as fast as I can.

The activities carried out during such a trial assessment would not constitute work. If they did, the trial would need to be paid, and at least at the national minimum wage. As the House will know, that applies from the worker’s first day at work, regardless of whether the employer labels that as a trial. A trial is already not legitimate if an employer has no intention of offering a job and is simply seeking a bit of free labour. Therefore, this is already covered in legislation.

I am worried that the Bill would lead to additional confusion for the voluntary sector and impose yet more regulatory burdens on employers. There is the risk that businesses would think twice about employing more people and expanding. It would also reduce genuine opportunities for people like me to find work. As vice-chair of the all-party group for small and micro businesses, I must add that the Federation of Small Businesses does not support the proposed change, for many of the reasons I have outlined.

The House will note that the Bill has considerable overlap with the Unpaid Work Experience (Prohibition) Bill, which originated in another place and completed its Committee stage on 13 March. That Bill quite rightly seeks to prohibit all unpaid work experience of longer than four weeks.

In conclusion, although I understand the hon. Gentleman’s motivation in introducing the Bill, and I commend him for that, I take the view, as someone who has taken part in many work trials and assessments, that not only is the current legislation sufficient, but hardening the law by creating a blanket ban would not be a productive way for us to proceed.

Michelle Donelan: Madam Deputy Speaker, I think that I have already made my views clear in my interventions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Chris Stephens.

Chris Stephens: I, too, have made my views clear, Madam Deputy Speaker.

2.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on his success in the private Members’ Bills ballot. I am proud to serve as the Minister responsible for the national living wage and for workers’ rights. I am very pleased to respond to this important debate. We all want to see the rights of workers protected; none of us wants to see workers abused, mistreated or unpaid. That is why this Government are at the cutting edge of bringing forward new rights and protections for workers.

The House will have seen, just a few weeks ago, our response to Matthew Taylor’s truly groundbreaking report, which not only looks at the modern labour force and how we treat people, but seeks to extend rights and protections to workers and employees who have never had those before.

The Government are proud to protect workers’ rights and are proving that we do not need the European Union to help us do that; we are doing it here in this Parliament. I am very keen to work with the hon. Member for Glasgow South to address the issues that...
Andrew Griffiths

he has raised today. There is a very clear way in which we can do that without the need for further regulations. The law is already very clear on this. These practices are outlawed under the current national minimum wage—

2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)). Ordered, That the debate be resumed tomorrow.

Business without Debate

BBC LICENCE FEE (CIVIL PENALTY) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE (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 27 April.

BENEFITS AND PUBLIC SERVICES (RESTRICTION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April.

ELECTRONIC CIGARETTE (REGULATION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April.

UNIVERSAL CREDIT (APPLICATION, ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE) 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.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE DRIVERS (PROTECTIONS) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 6 July.

BRITISH INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORY (CITIZENSHIP) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April.

PEDICABS (LONDON) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April.

DOMESTIC PROPERTIES (MINIMUM ENERGY PERFORMANCE) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April.

VAGRANCY (REPEAL) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November.

VOTER REGISTRATION (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April.

KEW GARDENS (LEASES) (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April.

RIVERS AUTHORITIES AND LAND DRAINAGE BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April.

WILD ANIMALS IN CIRCUSES BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April.

FORENSIC SCIENCE REGULATOR BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April.
Dulwich Hamlet Football Club

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Amanda Milling.)

2.34 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to bring to the House serious issues that threaten the future of my much loved local football club, Dulwich Hamlet, and which have relevance for local non-league and league clubs throughout the country.

I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to my predecessor as MP for Dulwich and West Norwood, Baroness Jowell of Brixton, whose involvement with Dulwich Hamlet football club goes back a long way and who I know is close to the hearts of Dulwich Hamlet supporters. I also thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), in whose constituency the Champion Hill stadium sits and whose support for this campaign has been invaluable, and Lord Kennedy of Southwark, who has raised this issue in the other place and ensured that very few parliamentarians are unaware of the issues facing Dulwich Hamlet and have not been photographed wearing the club’s scarf. Finally, I thank the Dulwich Hamlet Supporters’ Trust, Dulwich Hamlet football club, my many constituents who have written to me about this issue, and the thousands who turn up regularly at Champion Hill to support the team.

I will speak today about community: a local community emblematic of the diversity and cohesion that makes London so great, and a national community that is galvanised by the same ideals as our pocket of south-east London. Dulwich Hamlet FC are not unique in their current struggle. Their cause has received support from London and how Dulwich Hamlet and its loyal supporters have not been photographed wearing the club’s scarf. Their story has raised this issue in the other place and ensured that very few parliamentarians are unaware of the issues facing Dulwich Hamlet and have not been photographed wearing the club’s scarf. Finally, I thank the Dulwich Hamlet Supporters’ Trust, Dulwich Hamlet football club, my many constituents who have written to me about this issue, and the thousands who turn up regularly at Champion Hill to support the team.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the wonderful idea of promoting young people’s access to sport. When we have so much knife and gun crime, it is important that sport can provide a meaningful outlet for young people, and for older people, too.

Helen Hayes: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about the role that football can play. I shall address some of those issues a little later in my speech.

There are stories similar to Dulwich Hamlet’s from the football community throughout the country: from Skelmersdale to Merthyr, Torquay, Hereford and Coventry. Communities are fragile and the spaces and institutions that bring people from a diverse range of backgrounds together can be rare. Local football clubs provide this focus and an opportunity for friendships to be developed and bonds strengthened through the sharing of the passion that football inspires.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Many of my constituents have contacted me about Dulwich Hamlet and they have all spoken about their love and affinity for the club. As my hon. Friend says, football clubs are often the linchpin of communities, but they are increasingly threatened by buy-outs, as we have seen in Dulwich. Does she agree that the Government should look into strengthening protections for these community assets?

Helen Hayes: I do indeed agree that more can be done to protect these powerful institutions. When such institutions are lost they may be gone forever, so we must do all that we can to keep them alive. The Government may argue that they cannot intervene in the commercial or legal affairs of any individual club, but the situation at Dulwich is not individual; it is representative of a much wider problem, in which short-term financial gain seeks to assert itself over an institution valued not just in pounds and pence, but in people, friendship, aspiration and history.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I am really pleased that my hon. Friend has brought this issue to the House. The Hamlet has a lot of affection and a lot of people respect it, but this issue is bigger and wider than that one club. If we do not have grassroots football—if we do not have the small teams such as, in my part of the world, Hayes & Yeading, where players like Les Ferdinand and Paul Merson started—how are we going to channel talent into the higher leagues? Without teams like the Hamlet, we will not have top-tier football. The Minister is a great sportswoman and she supports a team in north London, the name of which escapes me. Does my hon. Friend agree that without teams like the Hamlet, we would not have teams like Spurs?

Helen Hayes: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend’s remarks.

This year, Dulwich Hamlet celebrated its 125th anniversary. The historic first formal meeting of Hamlet Old Boys and founder Pa Wilson took place on Friday 28 January 1893 at the Dulwich Hamlet Elementary School in Dulwich village. The team eventually settled at Champion Hill in 1902—the same year in which both Manchester United and Real Madrid were founded—and it has been there ever since.

Dulwich Hamlet has a long history and a strong and proud heritage: they are four-time FA Amateur cup winners; two Hamlet players, Edgar Kail and Bert Coleman, earned full England caps; and in 1948 Champion Hill was used for the London Olympics, hosting football just as the neighbouring Herne Hill velodrome hosted cycling.

It has not all been plain sailing over the years. The club faced closure in the 1960s, and in the 1980s it gave up its old ground to ensure that there was a future and a new stadium. But Dulwich Hamlet is far more than just a football club. It is part of the very fabric of the local community through its inclusive and accessible approach to football, its social activity supporting good causes, and the many initiatives that are led by the club and its army of volunteers—from Dulwich to Dunkirk and to Syria.

One fan told of his days as a beat bobby in south-east London and how Dulwich Hamlet and its loyal supporters—the Rabble—came together to engage the local youngsters, providing school competitions, role models, and an alternative to getting into trouble; just one of countless initiatives the club has led in the community. Under current manager Gavin Rose, who is in the Public Gallery today, the Aspire Academy has been
developed and works with hundreds more young people every year. Thirty-five players from the academy have moved into the professional game. Aspire is not just about success on the field—although it is certainly that—and it is not just about developing better players; it is also about instilling in our young people the importance of becoming better members of their community.

I am proud of the many young people from Aspire who have not gone on to make a career in football, but who have become outstanding citizens. The academy’s work is not limited to young people. In recent years, it has seen the club host a ground-breaking match against the Stonewall 11 in support of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights; arranged food bank collections; and sent aid to refugees in Calais. I have with me today a special edition scarf to celebrate 100 years of women’s suffrage. The list of its work goes on.

Dulwich Hamlet has a strong community identity. It is a family club that has brought pleasure—and admittedly some pain—to generations of supporters. It is very often the first club that children attend because it is local, family friendly and has a great community feel.

Dulwich Hamlet FC fans mainly live nearby and are part of our wider local community. They are rightly proud of the way that they have grown to become a central part of that community, and they are recognised for what they are doing. The efforts made by the club and all its volunteers to ensure that the club connects with all parts of its local community were recognised in 2016, when it was awarded the football foundation community club of the year at the National Game Awards in London. Everyone wants to keep the club that way and, given the chance, I know that it can do even more.

Dulwich Hamlet has business sponsors and partners who back the club financially, put up posters and display its scarves because of the positive image the team has in the local community and the benefit that the supporters bring to their businesses. The club is heading in the right direction. As recently as 2008-09, the club saw average attendances of just 180. That has now risen to more than 1,500 this season, proving the sustainability of the club and the impact that it has on the community.

Dulwich Hamlet has much to celebrate, currently sitting third in the league and chasing a promotion to the Conference South, but off the pitch the picture is entirely different. The club was acquired by Meadow Partners with operating partner Hadley in 2014. The company took day-to-day control of the club and paid off a significant number of debts, which had come very close to driving the club into bankruptcy. It made no secret of the fact that it was looking to redevelop some or all of the current ground, with the club being moved to more appropriate facilities nearby. It publicly stated that giving the club a long-term future was an integral part of its plans.

In March 2016, an application to redevelop the ground was submitted to Southwark Council. The plans included provision for 155 new dwellings, as well as a new stadium for the club to be built on metropolitan open land, which would be handed over to Dulwich Hamlet FC for fan ownership. However, there was no planning policy designation for residential use on that site, and of course there was the very strong planning protection of metropolitan open land, which meant that, essentially, there was no clear policy framework against which the council could determine the application.

In December 2017, a planning appeal was lodged by Meadow on the grounds that Southwark Council had failed to reach a decision within the required timescale. Subsequent legal wrangling between the developer and the council over the football club’s lease resulted in costs, thought to be around £320,000, being awarded against the club, which had played no role in the legal case, and ultimately to the developer withdrawing the planning appeal.

Following the withdrawal of the planning appeal, the developer announced that it had withdrawn all financial support and management of the football club as, in its opinion, there was no chance of its being able to build on the part of the site that was the subject of the dispute concerning the lease. In December 2017, Meadow demanded that the football club sign a new lease to continue playing at Champion Hill or face being evicted.

Recently, things have accelerated further. Dulwich Hamlet has been locked out of its ground—including access to club merchandise, historic memorabilia and the war memorial. In a bizarre turn of events, Dulwich Hamlet FC has even had its own name, nickname and initials registered as a trade mark and was told not to use them. Although I understand that there may have been some progress on this in the past few days, it is nevertheless the case that, last week, Dulwich Hamlet found itself without a home and without a name, putting at risk its historic ground and the basis for all the wonderful work that it does.

None of this is necessary. There are a number of alternative options on the table from potential investors who are interested in doing the right thing: safeguarding the club and building much needed social housing. Southwark Council has made a strong commitment to the club, including taking a formal decision this week that it would make capital funding available to acquire the site. But not every club benefits from such a strong and vocal support base, and a strong and committed council.

The situation developing at Champion Hill is unfortunately far from an isolated one. Across the country, we are seeing clubs whose communities face losing access to vital sports grounds or that have been adversely affected by stadium land deals. After all, many football clubs—particularly in London and not only at non-league level—have found themselves homeless, and in some cases merged or out of business, after falling victim to the ambitions of property developers.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I know that time is of the essence, but what exactly would the hon. Lady like the Government to do to help the club?

Helen Hayes: If the hon. Gentleman bears with me for just a couple of minutes, I will come to exactly those points.

There is a significant housing crisis in London. At least 50,000 new homes a year are needed just to keep up with demand, and the unavoidable fact is that football clubs commonly sit on large, expensive sites and are often considered less valuable than the ground beneath them. This is not an argument against building new
homes, which are essential, but as new homes are being built we must also take care of the fabric of communities—the institutions and the places that knit people together. It is this value that is never captured on the developer’s balance sheet.

In London the list of clubs that are under pressure is depressingly long. In recent years Enfield Town, Edgware Town, Hendon and Thurrock football clubs have all lost their historical homes. Away from London and the south-east, where the pressure on housing and the value of land is not always so acute, the story continues. Northampton Town, Kettering Town, Torquay United, Skelmersdale United, Coventry City and Merthyr Town—to name just a few—are all facing battles to survive as the property developers circle. As with Dulwich Hamlet, these teams are very much a part of their communities.

As a symbol of the solidarity and community that exist across the world of local football, Dulwich Hamlet will play out its remaining games this season at arch rival Tooting and Mitcham United’s ground. The club has had messages of support from countless teams across the country. More can be done to stop the situation at Dulwich Hamlet happening to other clubs, and I will end by making a number of asks of the Minister.

First, will the Minister commit to an urgent audit of the premises of league and non-league football grounds and stadiums across the country, and quantify the extent and nature of the threat that is exemplified by the situation at Dulwich Hamlet? Secondly, will she use that information to make the case to her colleagues at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government for greater protection to be afforded to league and non-league football grounds, with all the protections introduced by Labour to safeguard school playing fields as a model?

Thirdly, will the Minister review how it could possibly come to pass that a developer was able to register the trademark of a 125-year-old football club, seemingly without regard to the live and continuous use of the club’s name? How could this decision possibly have been approved by the Intellectual Property Office? Will she take steps to ensure that no other football clubs can be threatened with the loss of their identity in this way?

Fourthly, will she look at the redistribution of funding within the football world from the premier league to grassroots football, without which the premier league will be starved of the talent it needs to be sustained?

**Stephen Pound:** I did not want to interrupt my hon. Friend because she has made an incredibly powerful case, and I know that the Minister will be very keen to respond, but I hope that she will pay tribute to the Football Foundation, which is doing a great deal of work in redistributing money. I appreciate that one of the problems with British football is that there is a lot of money at the top and not a lot at the feeder clubs, but the Football Foundation—in my opinion and I think, in that of many of our colleagues—is doing a really good job for grassroots football.

**Helen Hayes:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point.

Finally, will the Minister progress reforms to ensure that the fit and proper persons test must apply to non-league ownership and that some form of bond be attached to any acquisition, and explore how fans can play a greater protective role in the ownership and governance of league and non-league football clubs?

For Dulwich Hamlet the immediate solution is simply for the club to be given its home back. The current breakdown of trust and relationship between Meadow, the council and the club is of grave concern. It would be better for everyone, including Meadow, for the land to be sold at fair market value on terms that guarantee a sustainable future for the club. I hope that the Minister will also join me in calling on Meadow to re-engage with the council and the club, and to negotiate a way forward that places a secure future for Dulwich Hamlet football club at its historical home, Champion Hill, as the highest priority. Forward the Hamlet!

2.49 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch):** I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing time for this debate. I pay tribute to the efforts that she and others have made to bring to our attention the issues at Dulwich Hamlet which are rightly causing considerable local concern. I am not sure that there was anything in her passionate speech and the interventions of colleagues that I disagreed with.

Dulwich Hamlet football club has been part of the local community for 125 years. It started life, just like my two teams of Chatham Town and Tonbridge Hotspur, in the Southern league. When I lived in Herne Hill, I was in fact an occasional visitor myself to Champion Hill. While the club may not have gone on to the dizzy heights of the Lilywhites, its standing in non-league football today cannot be overestimated. It currently sits near the top of the Bostik league, with a dedicated following of nearly 2,000. This is relatively unheard of for a team that resides in the seventh tier of English football. There is also all the brilliant academy work that the hon. Lady mentioned.

It is a massive shame, therefore, that at a time when we should be celebrating the achievements of this unique club, we are here because of deep concerns for its immediate future. What is disappointing is that those concerns operate almost entirely outside of the club’s management control and its on-field performance. Instead, they involve the intersection of land ownership, planning consent and community regeneration. Quite frankly, it has turned into an utter mess. On the one side, we have Meadow Partners, the owners of Champion Hill, and their plans to redevelop the site; and on the other, Southwark Council, which has not accepted the planning application, for reasons that are best explained by the council itself. It is not for me to take sides in the planning dispute, but I will say that it is hugely disappointing that in this instance the football club is stuck in the middle, and that it and the fans are the victims in all this. That is not right. Football clubs remain a matter of great importance to their local communities, and we should never underestimate their value. Every care must be taken by their owners and stakeholders to safeguard their long-term future.

Indeed, it is the special place that football clubs hold in our communities, and the need to preserve that at all costs, that I want to focus my attention on today. With regard to Dulwich Hamlet, I understand that Southwark
Council has asked its director of regeneration to start negotiations with Meadow over the sale of the site. Those negotiations must ensure that the needs of the club are protected. Should the negotiations fail—it is clear that there remains something of an impasse—I will look to find and appoint an independent mediator who can facilitate the constructive talks needed between all parties and, in the process, help to secure a future for this well-supported community club for many years to come.

I appreciate that Dulwich Hamlet is not the only football club to have suffered as a result of a land or stadium development dispute. We need to learn lessons from this dispute, where there is a separation between the ownership of the club and that of the stadium. Without pre-empting this, one lesson may be that clubs must be supported to insist on proper contractual agreements with ground owners that make the terms of residence, roles and responsibilities transparent and sustainable.

I will be sitting down with the Football Association to ascertain what further steps it can take to help its member clubs engaged in similar situations, and to prevent further breakdowns between clubs and landowners. I will recommend that the FA begin by speaking to the fan organisation Supporters Direct, which has shown an interest in carrying out a review of the extent to which football stadiums in the English league system are separated from the ownership of their clubs, who are the primary users. Further awareness of ground ownership will help to provide clarity for fans around the ownership structures of their club and an understanding of the potential risk of stadium disposal. With better information on the risks, fans can ask the right questions of the right people at regular intervals.

This approach fits with the Government’s work with fan organisations and the football authorities in recent years to help strengthen football supporter ownership and engagement. With regard to the ask by the hon. Lady, this will almost certainly throw up considerations around the local planning process and role of the local council in protecting football stadiums. I will take further action by speaking to colleagues at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to see how they can engage in this process. I will also follow up her point about trademarks, and write to her subsequently.

The football authorities have done much work on regulations around owners and directors. Regulations in place for football ground ownership may also need to be strengthened, as undeveloped land increasingly becomes a financial asset.

Members will remember Wimbledon’s controversial move to Milton Keynes all those years ago. Wimbledon stands as a reminder of what can happen when a dispute over a football stadium results in the loss of a club to its community. The Wimbledon case did, however, lead to the football authorities strengthening their rules, which now ensure that plans are in place for clubs to remain in the towns and cities that bear their name.

The current frustrating events at Dulwich Hamlet are a prompt for proper consideration of the regulations that exist in relation to stadium ownership and encompass the better protection of all clubs. The immediate priority is for Dulwich Hamlet to fulfil its fixtures for the remainder of the season, and I thank Tooting and Mitcham for their offer to ground-share.

I fully expect all parties to sit down and try to find a solution that works and, importantly, has the football club as its primary consideration. I urge all parties to work to a solution now, and, as I said, if they need someone to mediate and adjudicate, I will find someone. However, I hope that it does not come to that and that a solution can be found by the start of next season. In the meantime, I wish the club and its supporters the very best for the rest of this season and thank the hon. Lady for her excellent advocacy on behalf of her local club and its fans.

Question put and agreed to.

2.55 pm
House adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 5 March 2018

Ian Austin in the Chair

British Sign Language: National Curriculum

4.30 pm

Ian Austin (in the Chair): I draw Members’ attention to the fact that today’s proceedings are being made accessible to people who are deaf or hearing-impaired. The interpreters are using British Sign Language, and Parliament TV is showing a live, simultaneous interpretation of the debate. I call Liz Twist to move the motion.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered e-petition 200000 relating to British Sign Language being part of the national curriculum.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. Last September, I had the pleasure of meeting Erin, a young woman involved in the National Deaf Children’s Society. Erin told me very clearly that many young people such as her who are deaf feel strongly that British Sign Language should be taught in schools, and that it should become a GCSE subject. As a result, more young people would be able to learn BSL, and it would be properly recognised as a language qualification, equal to other GCSEs. Erin’s determination, and her clear explanation of why BSL should be a GCSE subject, made a lasting impression on me. When today’s petition, created by Wayne Barrow, who is in the Gallery, came before the Petitions Committee, I was keen to speak on it, and to introduce it on behalf of Wayne, the many other petitioners and Erin.

Other hon. Members on the Committee were very conscious that, although the petition had not reached 100,000 signatures, which is the usual threshold, the issue should be considered by the House, because it is difficult to ask for 100,000 signatures when fewer than 100,000 people speak BSL as their first language. The Committee was also very keen that the debate be signed, so that young deaf people, and the not so young, could follow the debate as it happened—a first for a live debate in this House. I hope it is the first of many, as Parliament reaches out and becomes more inclusive. I thank our signers, the Committee and the House staff who made it possible.

What a day to be holding this debate, after the British film, “The Silent Child”, won an Oscar. Starring six-year-old Maisie Sly and Rachel Shenton, it tells the story of a four-year-old profoundly deaf girl who struggles to communicate until she learns sign language. I am sure that all Members will join me in sending our congratulations to Maisie, Rachel and the team that produced the film. Now all I have to do is follow that.

Moving on to the petition itself, the petitioners ask for BSL to be part of the national curriculum. They point out that about 50,000 people in the UK use BSL, that many children are born deaf and that those children should be given “a better chance at a more integrated future.”

Liz Twist: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for the information about the school, which I am sure is a good example to many others.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): While I was training to become a primary school teacher during the early 2000s, I completed a placement in a mainstream primary school that had fully embraced the integration of all children. Teachers spoke with a special microphone that was tuned into the children’s implants, and every session was signed. All the children benefited, and I benefited as a teacher; everyone benefits from this. I also congratulate Rachel Shenton and Maisie—what an amazing achievement. Let us hope that we see plenty more signing going on in Parliament in every debate.

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She gave a good example of how everyone benefits from BSL and signing, which is an idea that I will touch on later.

As I was saying, yesterday “The Silent Child” won an Oscar. Starring six-year-old Maisie Sly and Rachel Shenton, it tells the story of a four-year-old profoundly deaf girl who struggles to communicate until she learns sign language. I am sure that all Members will join me in sending our congratulations to Maisie, Rachel and the team that produced the film. Now all I have to do is follow that.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend on securing today’s debate. Deaf children should be able to interact with their peers as much as those children who can hear. Does she agree that a simple solution to make our education system truly inclusive would be for the Department for Education to include British Sign Language in the national curriculum for all schools and all children?

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I agree with that statement, and I hope to explain why.

The petitioners want BSL to be part of the national curriculum, giving better life chances to young people who are deaf. They believe that if BSL becomes part of the national curriculum, that will even up the chances of deaf young people being able to play a full part in school and attain the best results they can.

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I agree with that statement, and I hope to explain why.

The petitioners want BSL to be part of the national curriculum, giving better life chances to young people who are deaf. They believe that if BSL becomes part of the national curriculum, that will even up the chances of deaf young people being able to play a full part in school and attain the best results they can.

Let us look at the case. Research by the National Deaf Children’s Society into the attainment of deaf children in 2017 shows that deaf children continue to underachieve throughout their education compared with other children. Although the Department for Education claimed recently that attainment for deaf children is at an all-time high, the latest figures show that the attainment gap between deaf children and children with no identified special needs is widening, with the gap at GCSE level being particularly worrying. In 2016, 41.3% of deaf
children achieved the expected benchmark of five GCSEs at A* to C grade, compared with 69.3% of children with no identified special needs. That is a difference of more than 20%, which is just not acceptable in this day and age.

All that is in the context of a reduction of 14% in the number of qualified teachers of the deaf since 2011, and a 2% reduction in just one year—2016-17. We know that we have to do more to help deaf pupils to achieve their full potential and that we need to reverse the reduction in the number of teachers of the deaf. We can do that partly by ensuring that young deaf pupils are able to have effective communication. For many, that will be through BSL. BSL has been a recognised language since 2003, but unlike other languages it is not recognised as a GCSE that can be taught in schools.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): In Hartlepool, there are many initiatives to promote inclusion and the use of BSL. Does my hon. Friend agree that BSL should at least be offered as part of the curriculum?

Liz Twist: I agree with my hon. Friend that that is very important.

A pilot GCSE has been trialled and is ready to go, but the DFE is refusing to give it the go-ahead. I ask the Minister to talk to his colleagues in other Departments, and to work with them to agree the GCSE and make it available to students. The absence of a qualification in BSL with the same status as other GCSEs discourages schools from teaching sign language—a view supported by a survey run by an organisation called Signature, which I will talk about shortly.

However, making BSL a national curriculum subject is about more than just exams. It is about the whole young person and ensuring that they are able to play a full part in school activities, get on with their peers and have a full life in school and out of school.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that 23,000 children aged under 15 suffer from deafness? Teaching BSL in schools will increase the inclusion of those children, help others understand what it is to be deaf, and therefore help social cohesion in school for all pupils.

Liz Twist: I agree strongly with my hon. Friend’s point. It is really important that deaf children are able to take part fully in the life of the school.

In 2016-17, Signature carried out a survey of more than 2,000 young people, of whom 700 were deaf and 1,400 were hearing, on behalf of the National Deaf Children’s Society youth advisory board, which is made up of young people from across the UK, such as Erin, who believe strongly that there should be more opportunities for young people—deaf or hearing—to learn BSL, which is an officially recognised language in the UK. The survey showed that 91% of young people want to learn sign language, 92% think schools should offer a BSL GCSE, and 97% think BSL should be taught in schools. Their reasons include inclusivity, as doing those things would ensure that deaf people are fully integrated into society and not disadvantaged because others cannot communicate with them effectively; the importance of communication in general; and equality—they likened learning BSL to learning French or Spanish and said that BSL was at least equally important. They thought that being able to use BSL would improve employment prospects, both directly and indirectly, but many did not know of anywhere they could learn it at no or little cost.

I have already mentioned the shortage of qualified teachers of the deaf, but there is a wider shortage. In 2017, the Department for Work and Pensions highlighted that shortages in sign language interpreters have resulted in higher costs for Government programmes such as Access to Work, and have made it harder for deaf people to enter the workplace. A GCSE could lead to more people considering interpreting for deaf people as a career.

I do not want to make this petition downbeat. Some amazing young and older people are getting out there and making the case for BSL and other measures to improve inclusivity. Since this debate was announced, a number of people—not just young people—have contacted me to tell me about the work they are doing. They include Kathy Robinson, who runs Signs for Success, which teaches very young children to sign so they can communicate from their earliest days and do not face the isolation that can come with deafness. She believes that all children—not just those who are deaf—can benefit from learning to sign. People such as Erin and other young people from the National Deaf Children’s Society are out there campaigning on this issue.

As you do these days, I googled Wayne and had a look at his Twitter feed and at the site that he and his friend Lizzy Jay have, on which they sign and sing pop songs—actually, Wayne assures me that he does not sing, because he cannot, but he signs along to pop songs. This debate and this petition are about BSL helping young people to have fun as well as learn. It is not all about serious stuff.

I was contacted by a young constituent from Blaydon—my hon. Friends and I will not give her name—who told me about her time at school, which was not an easy experience. She is out there pushing for more people to learn BSL. We need to ensure deaf young people have the best possible chance. This petition is one way of ensuring we make progress in this area.

It is about time that some of us MPs had a go at learning BSL. I am sure we could arrange classes in this place. I am sure that is achievable. I will commit to putting my name down to learn, and I know that many other Members will join me.

One of the great things about petitions is that we get a Government response—hon. Members may have seen it on the website—so we know what the Minister may be going to say, although I very much hope he will be much bolder in what he says about the proposal to include BSL in the national curriculum. I am sure other hon. Members will ask him to do the same. Basically, the Government said, “Schools can already teach it. It doesn’t need to be part of the national curriculum. We have no plans to change it.” Well yes, Minister, we know that schools can do it, but those of us who have been teachers, governors or just parents know that the school timetable is already under huge pressure. Without an additional push, in most cases it will not happen. We know from the National Deaf Children’s Society survey that young people are keen and willing to learn BSL, but the Government must help to make it part of the curriculum.
The Government said—a number of people said to me that they took exception to this comment—that BSL is a “useful tool”. It is not just a useful tool; it is an essential part of communicating with the outside world and other people. It is an essential tool for many of our young people, and we should respect that.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister to push the boat out a bit, to respond positively to the request to make BSL part of the national curriculum, and to give our deaf young people the best possible chance.

4.46 pm

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on her work in facilitating this debate.

It is either coincidental or a subliminal message from another place that this debate is taking place on the same day that “The Silent Child” won an Oscar. I have not seen the film, but I understand that sign language is the means by which a whole new world is opened up for Libby, the four-year-old star of the story. Similarly, if BSL is part of the national curriculum and there is a GCSE in sign language, a whole new world will be opened up for thousands of deaf and hard-of-hearing young children and adults around the UK.

Later this month, I shall be accompanying Daniel Jillings from Lowestoft and his mother, Ann, to meet the Minister, at his very kind invitation, so they can explain why a GCSE in sign language is so important to them. Ann highlighted to me that BSL is deaf children’s first language. She said it is discriminatory that they do not have the opportunity to achieve the most widely recognised qualification in their first language, and that it is given a lower status than other languages. It is accepted that there are other accredited qualifications in BSL, but they are not widely available to children in schools and are less likely to be recognised by employers.

Daniel achieved his BSL level 1 three years ago. It was not funded, and Ann tutored him and paid for all the assessments herself. That is not right. There is a compelling case for a GCSE in BSL. First, we must ensure equality. Many other languages are rightly taught at GCSE, including Arabic, Biblical Hebrew, Persian and Urdu. In an outward-looking, pluralistic country, it is right that they are taught, but the deaf and the hard of hearing must be placed on the same level playing field.

Secondly, the continuing absence of a GCSE in BSL is a denial of choice. A survey by the National Deaf Children’s Society’s youth advisory board found that 92% of young people who are deaf or hard of hearing think schools should offer a BSL GCSE.

Finally, the continuing non-availability of a GCSE in BSL puts up a barrier for many young people initially to further and higher education and thereafter to entry into the workplace. A barrier was taken down in Hollywood last night, as Rachel Shenton used BSL in her Oscar acceptance speech. I look forward to meeting the Minister with Daniel and Ann later this month so we can begin work on taking down a barrier in Westminster.

4.49 pm

**Jim Fitzpatrick** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Austin. I am grateful to the Petitions Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for the opportunity to debate the issue. I am very pleased to see that the proceedings are being broadcast live with full British Sign Language interpretation.

I should record that I wear two hearing aids, because my hearing was damaged during my time in the London fire brigade, although I am sure age is contributing as well now. I am also chair of the all-party parliamentary group on deafness.

The previous debate, secured in Westminster Hall by the all-party group, was on 30 November, and excellent speeches were made by many colleagues. It was signed, if not live, but that too was a parliamentary first. This is the first debate with simultaneous translation for the live feed, although I understand it has been something of a challenge to make it possible, so I congratulate the House authorities and the Petitions Committee on ensuring that it happens today.

The 30 November debate was wide-ranging, whereas today’s is specific to British Sign Language and making it part of the national curriculum. The APPG has been trying to identify which Minister in which Department we should speak to about this important matter. On 11 September last year I submitted a parliamentary question to the Cabinet Office to ask just that, but the answer was not clear. Subsequently, we chased not only the Cabinet Office but the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and the Department of Health and Social Care for clarification. It now seems to be clear that the Department for Work and Pensions is the lead Department because deafness is a disability, which has some logic.

I therefore need to ask the Minister what discussions he has had with his ministerial colleagues at the DWP about the prospects for a British Sign Language GCSE. As he knows, the DFE has already piloted a GCSE and has it ready to go, but the Government will not give it the green light. One has to ask why not. Perhaps the Minister will explain in the wind-ups whether that is a DWP decision or a DFE one.

Scotland has led the way with the passing of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015. In 2016 Northern Ireland launched its consultation, and now the Welsh Government are consulting on introducing BSL in their curriculum. England seems to be lagging behind. In 2003, in UK terms, BSL was officially recognised as a language in its own right by the Department for Work and Pensions. In 2009 the UK Government ratified the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, which states, among other things, that we should uphold such rights by: “Recognizing and promoting the use of sign languages.”

Having said that, however, I think there is a small conflict between the title of the petition and what people were being asked to sign. The title states, “Make British Sign Language part of the National Curriculum”, but the wording asks why BSL is not taught in schools. The National Deaf Children’s Society has reiterated its position on a BSL GCSE: the society does not believe that it needs to be a mandatory part of the national curriculum, but that it might be easier for the DFE simply to approve the GCSE in British Sign Language that has already been piloted. That would make it an option for schools, should they deem it appropriate, but the DFE appears to be refusing to give the go-ahead due to a blanket policy on no new GCSEs.
The NDCS reinforces its view with a variety of points. On equality, if we can teach Turkish, Japanese and Russian—the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) came up with some even more obscure examples—but not British Sign Language, the implication is that BSL has a lower status and importance. Surely that could be demonstrated to be discriminatory if it came to the courts. On denial of choice, thousands of young people, whether deaf or hearing, would choose the subject, but they do not get the chance. On discouraging the teaching of BSL, having no GCSE deters teachers because it has reduced status. On reducing options for young deaf people and supporting wider Government initiatives, as we have heard, the DWP accepted in a 2017 report that we have a shortage of registered deaf interpreters, resulting in higher costs for such services and making it harder for deaf people to enter the workforce.

My questions for the Minister include the following: if the Department has a ready-to-go GCSE, why not authorise it? Why encourage schools to teach BSL without affording them the chance to benchmark their performances? Why offer GCSE equivalents in the form of national vocational qualifications but not a GCSE? I think—I suspect the NDCS does too—that the strongest of those points was the first: the question whether the decision not to support a BSL GCSE is discriminatory. The society promotes the issue first as a matter of law and, were a case to come before the courts, the Government could be forced to act.

I do not think that the Government should be forced to act; I think they should do so voluntarily. They should not be embarrassed or shamed by Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast for dragging their feet on the matter. In my view, that is doing not only a great disservice to deaf English schoolchildren but much more—it is tantamount to insulting them. Parliament is saying to the thousands on thousands of youngsters for whom British Sign Language is a primary method of communication with each other and the world that Turkish, Japanese, Russian, Chinese, Greek and Portuguese are more important than their language.

The Minister is held in high regard throughout the House for his integrity and honesty, but I have to ask him, are we sure about this? I am sure that he will not want to give a negative response to that question but, equally, I will be very surprised if he can say anything positive today. No, I will be more than surprised—I will be delighted if he can say something more positive on the subject. The least I hope that the Minister can do, however, would be to agree to take the matter back to the Department, to discuss it with ministerial colleagues and to try again. The officers of the all-party parliamentary group and deaf organisations have a meeting with the Minister on the subject, as he knows, next Monday afternoon. We will press our case before him again then.

In conclusion, I am grateful for another opportunity to raise this issue. I am sure that the Minister knows it will not go away. The Government, I think, recognise not only the inconsistency of their position, not only the unfairness in the provision, but the positive opportunities a change of policy would offer. I look forward to the day when we hear of such a change. Today would be great, next Monday would do also, but soon, Minister, please—soon.
5.3 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): "In British Sign Language: ‘Thank you, Chair. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.’"

I started by signing, creating a barrier for everybody who does not sign, because I wanted to make the point that British Sign Language is the first language of 70,000 people in our country, so it is really important to understand how we create barriers and disable people. People are not disabled, except by the barriers we create for them.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for the way she opened the debate. I want to tell the story of why I learned sign language, explain why it is really important that BSL is in the national curriculum, and ask the Minister some questions. I also thank the interpreters for their work.

I began learning sign language because my neighbours were profoundly deaf. We would write notes to one another, but I never got to know them that well. We had a barrier between us: they could not verbalise, and I could not sign. I asked myself who had created that barrier and thought, “Actually, I’ve got a responsibility to learn how to break that barrier.” That was my first reason for learning. My second reason was that I was a physiotherapist in a school where children signed and they were teaching me. I wanted to treat them, as their physio, so we had to work together to find a way to ensure that they understood what I was saying, and it was really important that I understood them. My third reason for learning was that I became the head of equality at the trade union MSF, which became Unite, where my whole raison d’être was taking down barriers for disabled people, whether they had a physical impairment or a hearing impairment. There I was, saying one thing and doing another, so I took myself off to night school and learned to sign.

Learning to sign was an incredible experience, which I recommend to everyone. Not only did I have a lot of fun and laugh at myself, but it meant that I could create new friendships and had new opportunities. Throughout my life, I have found it incredibly useful. I have been at meetings where there have been non-hearing people and I have been able to interpret for them. My signing is not perfect, and I am very rusty, but at least it gave those people the opportunity to access the meeting.

There are more fundamental reasons for ensuring that we sign in our country and that we make learning sign language a universal opportunity: it would improve social and economic opportunities for people with a hearing impairment and remove barriers between young people and their potential friends. We have to remove those barriers. It is absolutely right that we should put in the investment to give those children a real opportunity.

I am glad to say that I could one day communicate with my neighbours in Norwich and we were able to build a really strong friendship as a result of my being able to sign, but what about people who do not have those opportunities? I want to talk about some of the ways that sign language can open up opportunities, but it also has universal benefits. I gave an example of a meeting, but I have also been in a supermarket with a non-hearing person who did not understand what the cashier was saying. I was able to sign and break down the barrier. Believe it or not, being able to sign has also meant that I can talk to people about politics when I am out door knocking, which is good, too.

Laura Smith: I hold my hands up and say that, although I learned a little sign language as a teacher, I am very much looking forward to the classes that my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) is going to organise. As a Member of Parliament, I feel quite ashamed. If a deaf person came to one of my surgeries, how would I communicate with them? We need to set an example. The debate is about children, but I think we are all reflecting about ourselves, too. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for making such a powerful point.

Rachael Maskell: I thank my hon. Friend. I, too, am looking forward to going along to those classes.
Jim Fitzpatrick: I have done some research on behalf of the all-party group on deafness, and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority will fund classes. I have asked the UK Council on Deafness to identify tutors who would be able to come in. Getting colleagues together is always difficult given our busy diaries, but since the cost of classes is a legitimate expense—as my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) described very well, we should learn sign language to better serve our constituents—and the House authorities will help us do that, we should get on with it.

Rachael Maskell: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. Learning sign language really is life transforming, because people can share so much once they are able to communicate. We know from verbalised languages the difference that makes. British Sign Language is the first language of 70,000 people in Britain. We must always remember that, and ensure that it is accessible.

I have also signed at church. I have to say, it can be a bit nerve-racking to stand at the front and sign, but over time I found it brought real meaning to the words we sung and spoke, so there was a personal benefit as well as a broader one. We now see mainstreaming in the media, with the Oscars and the new film starring Maisie Sly. What a role model she is for young girls and young people on the benefits of sign language.

Why should BSL be on the national curriculum? If we had a signing nation, what a difference there would be. We should think first about baby sign, which is taught in some places. Babies learn to communicate first through signing and gesture before they can verbalise. We could get quicker communication with babies immediately, which would be a real advantage. We also want to ensure that children can grow up in mainstream education without facing barriers. There are links between British Sign Language and Makaton—although they are not the same language, some signs translate—so we could be more inclusive in enabling disabled children to be part of that wider learning community. Children are quick learners, so that is the time to learn a new language.

British Sign Language is difficult, but it is expressive and children will grasp that. It is about integration, not being different, having the same opportunities, having friends, being able to study alongside peers and building an inclusive culture and society. As children grow up, it is about social inclusion and access to jobs, life and relationships. It is about saying, “You are no different from anybody else, and we’re going to take those barriers down.”

It is important that we recognise the qualifications. Why differentiate? GCSE is the standard recognised qualification, so we need to ensure that British Sign Language fits not with the national vocational qualifications, which I have worked my way through, but with GCSEs, putting it back in the mainstream of our education system. We know that hearing loss is a massive issue faced by people later in life. If people had skills to sign, that could open up new means of communication among older people. Perhaps someone who lost their speech because they had had a stroke could sign to continue communication, so ensuring access to BSL could bring real benefits later in life.

In my city, York College and York St John University offer qualifications up to level 3, but they say that, as well as a national shortage of interpreters, there is a national shortage of tutors. We need to encourage people to see that as a worthy profession and something to go into in the future.

I have a few points to make to the Minister. My first was to ask whether he could organise some BSL sessions in Parliament, but I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) has that in hand. However, some dialogue on that would be of benefit so that the Minister can demonstrate how BSL can provide and open up opportunities for children in school. It would be good to join those agendas together.

Secondly, we also need to shift the agenda here. While I really welcome us having had two interpreters throughout this debate, why not have interpreters for all debates? Why do we bring in inclusion just because we are talking about BSL? Whether we are talking about the economy or foreign affairs, it is relevant to people with hearing impairments. I hope we will see a tangible shift in that agenda.

Thirdly, on qualifications, the Department must now get its skates on and bring about a level playing field to ensure that the qualifications of children who have a hearing impairment in particular—but not exclusively—are seen to be no different from those of their peers, and we must ensure that they can study and pass exams in their first language, not just in their second language.

Finally, what a different kind of society we would have if we put BSL on the national curriculum right through schooling. It is not just about qualifications; it is about cultural change. The Minister has the opportunity to bring that about today.

5.14 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I pay tribute to Wayne Barrow, whose work has brought the debate to the House. This has been a consensual debate. I sometimes think this place works best when we are all pulling for the same thing, so let us hope there is some movement today as a result.

The hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) kicked off the debate by paying tribute to Maisie Sly. As the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) pointed out, it is almost as if someone had a hand in the debate coming about on the same day as the Oscars win. The hon. Lady spoke on various aspects, and the attainment gap in particular. I, too, speak as a teacher, and it really is important to consider that gap. No child should start education knowing that, in the end, they will have a worse set of results than another child. We need to ensure we are taking steps to combat that.

There is not yet a GCSE in BSL, but, as a result of this debate, I hope there will be. In Scotland, we are developing a Scottish Qualifications Authority qualification in BSL, so there will be certification in Scotland. It seems appropriate and sensible that the same happens for a GCSE in England, especially if the work has already been done.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), who is no longer in his place, talked about the difficulties of inclusion and social cohesion when people are excluded from society. That is an important point. The hon. Member for Waveney talked about the range of languages available at GCSE, which probably took many of us by surprise. That hammers home starkly the point that, without a GCSE in BSL,
we are selling short a large group of young people—not just those from the deaf community but other children who may want to pursue a career in that area.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) talked about the educational benefits to all children from learning BSL. I liked the phrase she used about the data obsession in school results. Something rich and valuable is lost in education when all we are interested in is the results at the end. She correctly pointed out that, unless BSL became a GCSE, it would remain low priority.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) shamed us all with her abilities and demonstrated in a simple way how barriers are created and removed. I liked her suggestion that older people who are suffering from hearing loss could learn sign and BSL as a method of continuing communication with loved ones and in their daily lives.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) talked about the work done in Scotland, and I want to say a bit about that. Obviously, the issues faced by deaf people in Scotland are exactly the same. The Scottish Government have a national strategy to make Scotland the best place in the world for deaf people. The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015, which was passed unanimously by the Scottish Parliament, promotes the use of British Sign Language and made provision for the preparation and publication of the British Sign Language national plan for Scotland, which we now have. A good thing about the Bill was the fact that it had cross-party support, and was passed unanimously by the Scottish Parliament, it would remain low priority.

We hope that more British Sign Language users will be encouraged to become school teachers and share their skills with other people; but we also hope that they will infiltrate into every profession so that people have more access to every aspect of government. The Scottish Government also have a plan for primary schools, called the 1+2 language plan, which requires every child of primary school age to have experience of their native language, whatever it may be, and of two additional languages—it might be French, Mandarin, Scottish Gaelic or BSL. That has had an interesting impact, particularly on some children with learning difficulties or speech and language difficulties. It is often far easier for them to sign than to talk.

The BSL national plan also sets out 70 actions that Ministers will take by 2020 to improve the lives of people who use sign language. That is backed by £1.3 million of public funding. I shall not go through all 70 actions, but I will highlight a couple. Scottish Ministers will be asked to make progress on investigating the level of BSL among teachers and support staff in schools in Scotland and on further developing the Scottish Qualifications Authority award in BSL. Hopefully that will come into being shortly, with, as I have said, the GCSE to follow. Something else on which Ministers will be expected to make progress is enabling parents who use BSL to be fully involved in their child’s education. For parents who are part of the deaf community, situations such as parents evenings and school concerts can be difficult. Progress is also asked for on expanding the teaching of BSL to hearing pupils in schools, and improving the experience of students who use BSL when they move from school to college, university, training or the world of work. Finally, we hope to ensure that every Scottish Government-funded employment and training opportunity is fully accessible to BSL users and that they are properly supported.

I want to end by quoting Dr. Terry Riley, the chair of the British Deaf Association:

“The Scottish Government’s National Plan is a brilliant example, for the rest of the United Kingdom to follow.”

We are not gloating about that, or feeling smug. It is only a starting position, and there is a lot more to do. However, I hope that the UK Government can follow suit on some of the key objectives of the plan. Our long-term plan has an ambitious aim: we want to make Scotland the best place in the world for people whose first or preferred language is BSL. That means that deaf and deaf-blind BSL users will be fully involved in daily and public life in Scotland as active, healthy citizens, and will be able to make informed choices about every aspect of their lives.
5.26 pm

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for securing and opening this important debate on BSL. I also thank Wayne Barrow: I have done a music video with him, which was a lot of fun. I look forward to the next one—maybe Wayne, Lizzy and I could do it. That would be really good. This is about bringing BSL to everyone, and putting it in front of everyone.

I thank the shadow education team for allowing me to respond on behalf of Her Majesty’s Opposition today because, while the issue is one of equality, it falls within education. BSL is an issue that is close to my heart. I was the first Member of Parliament to sign a question on it in the House.

Learning to sign is an eye-opening experience. I thank the interpreters, who do an amazing job—including the one they are doing here today—and the House authorities for providing a live subtitle feed. We are following in the footsteps of New Zealand and Australia in doing that. I know that it was not a piece of cake, but as with most things, the more we do them, the easier they get. We just need to do these things a lot more in this place, and then they will seem like nothing.

We have heard a lot about the Oscars and the win for “The Silent Child”, about Rachel Shenton delivering her Oscar speech in British Sign Language, and about Libby, the young girl in the film. People say, “What you see, you can be;” and the more we see people communicating by signing, the more we will take that as given and as the right thing to do.

The Labour Government recognised British Sign Language as a language in its own right in 2003. Fifteen years later it is time to take the next steps to equality for users of BSL. It is a little shocking that BSL GCSE is not offered in schools, given what we heard from the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) about how many languages are offered at GCSE. Why not BSL? It is a recognised language, after all. We should go further: is a recognised language, after all. We should go further: BSL has a lovely sign for the Labour party—but what is going on. A hearing person can learn to sign—even if it is just a little bit, or it is just finger-spelling—what is going on. A hearing person can learn to bridge that gap with a deaf person, and that is important.

Some people say to me, “Why learn BSL? Why is it an official language?” We have heard my hon. Friends the Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) speak about equality. Nobody in this place can be against equality. Nobody in this place can be against equality. Equality is equality; if it matters for one person, it matters for another. Why are we picking and choosing whose equality is more important? Deaf people deserve to have equality, a level playing field and British Sign Language as a recognised language.

The National Deaf Children’s Society carried out a comprehensive survey, which clearly showed that young people want to learn BSL. We have to remember that young people get old, whether we like it or not. Sometimes we do not believe we will ever get old, but young people get old and, as we have heard, thousands of older people lose their hearing. I have spoken to older people who say, “I wish I had learned some signing when I was younger, because then I wouldn’t feel so isolated.”

Now is the time. We have heard about lots of movements that are happening: now is the time for us to remove structural barriers in society. We need to ensure that more people are taught BSL. That will remove a structural barrier for deaf people and not only help them to reach their full potential, but help their mental health. A lot of deaf people suffer from mental health issues. A lot of people are trapped in a world of silence. When my hon. Friend the Member for York Central signed the beginning of her speech, there was complete silence in this room. I ask hon. Members to imagine that their whole lives were lived in that silence, everywhere they went, and that they could not communicate with anybody. That is the difference that learning sign language makes to people who are deaf.

Approximately one in six people suffers from a hearing loss. That is a lot of people in our country. I will speak briefly about why I learned BSL. The first time I spent a lot of time with deaf people was when I was at college, where there were two people who were deaf; I learned their names, and I learned to say hello and other little bits. Like my hon. Friend, I always wondered who was the person who could bring down the barrier: the person who cannot speak or the person who cannot sign? I realised it was me, who could not sign.

When I started working, there was a deaf person at work. I decided to go to evening classes to learn to sign. I went for two, or maybe three, years to learn how to sign. I am rusty now, because it was a long time ago, but I learned how to sign. I made a great friend at work. We signed, and we got ourselves in a lot of trouble, but it was a lot of fun. We talked about people, and they never knew about it, which would probably be quite a useful tool in Parliament.

BSL opens doors for people. It opened doors for me; I made new friends, and I make new friends wherever I go now. That could be in the supermarket, or on the buses or the trains, when an announcement is made and people do not know what is going on, but someone is able to sign—even if it is just a little bit, or it is just finger-spelling—what is going on. A hearing person can learn to bridge that gap with a deaf person, and that is important.

As I said, now is the time to remove the structural barriers. The Labour party has said that if we were in government, we would have a national plan for England. We would have a BSL Act, a consultation and a debate to ensure that we take up all the good practice happening in Scotland, Wales and elsewhere. Many other countries around the world have implemented an Act. I am not asking the Minister to go as far as the Labour party today—BSL has a lovely sign for the Labour party—but when he rises to his feet, I would like him to reflect on the fact that the Department for Work and Pensions has reported and highlighted a shortage of signing interpreters, resulting in higher costs for things such as Access to Work. We need more Access to Work, not less; we need to invest in it so that deaf people can reach their full potential. We need to invest, and the way to do that is to show commitment. I hope that when the Minister gets to his feet he will have some good news for the deaf community and BSL users. I ask him to please make BSL a GCSE.
The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Liz Twist) on securing this debate and on a powerful opening speech, and I add my congratulations to both the filmmakers and Maisie Sly on their work and their success at the Oscars last night with their film, “The Silent Child”. Although I have not yet seen the film, it raises important questions about the isolation that can arise from being born deaf in a hearing world, and highlights the difference that can be brought about by learning to communicate effectively.

The Government have recognised British Sign Language as a language in its own right since 2003. British Sign Language is a vital method of communication for many people and the first or preferred language for an estimated 70,000 deaf people in the United Kingdom. Of course, many hearing people—such as the hon. Members for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell)—choose to learn BSL in order to communicate more effectively with hearing-impaired people in everyday life. I very much enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for York Central.

The Government understand, as I do, the passion that many organisations and individuals have for including BSL in the national curriculum. The reformed national curriculum, introduced in 2014, places a much greater focus on the core academic knowledge that pupils need for success in an ever more globalised world. That core body of knowledge is not expected to change significantly over time, but the national curriculum is just one element in the wide-ranging education of every child that makes up the broader school curriculum.

When we reformed the national curriculum, our expert panel made a clear distinction between the national curriculum and the school curriculum. We wanted the national curriculum to be kept within a certain size, to enable schools to develop a broader school curriculum. There is enough time and space in the school day, in each week, term and year, to expand beyond the specifications found in the national curriculum.

We are unapologetically ambitious for every child, no matter what their background, prior attainment or educational needs. The best possible education for adult life in modern Britain is one that equips children and young people with the knowledge they need to succeed. Our reforms have led to the attainment gap between advantaged peers closing by an astonishing 10% since 2011.

To do that, we ensured that the national curriculum is consistent with the need to set standards and reduce the extent to which teachers were being driven to teach for GCSEs or SATs. We set out a range of changes, including reducing unnecessary exam and homework, to ensure that teachers had the time and space to focus on teaching and their own professional development.

The Department’s programme of work on teacher workload aims to enable teachers to focus on teaching and their own professional development. While we believe that BSL is an important and worthwhile area of study, we do not have plans to change the national curriculum for schools to make teaching BSL mandatory for maintained schools—particularly as two thirds of secondary schools now have academy status and are not obliged to follow any part of the national curriculum, whether we revise it or not. Schools may choose to offer BSL as part of their wider school curriculum, or as part of a varied programme of extracurricular activities. Some may also offer accredited BSL qualifications to support pupils’ achievements in the language.

For people who wish to develop their ability to communicate effectively with those with a hearing impairment in everyday situations, level 1 and 2 qualifications, which already exist, have the greatest take-up. The level 1 and 2 qualifications currently offered by the Institute of British Sign Language, Signature and ABC Awards enable people to engage in routine conversations about real life and daily experiences and to develop a wide grasp of grammar to deal with non-routine exchanges. For those who wish, there are opportunities to develop practical skills in BSL further into level 3 and 4, and even level 6, which is equivalent to a degree. Individuals who take these qualifications might wish to enter a career working professionally with deaf people, such as in interpreting or teaching.

Laura Smith: I am quite upset about the tone of the Minister’s message, after a debate in which we thought we were getting a bit of movement. As a former teacher, I put on the record that I completely disagree with his statements regarding teachers feeling supported at the present time. I think it is very sad—I saw people in the Public Gallery shaking their heads—that the Government are once again prioritising exams and results in the curriculum, rather than inclusion and providing a diverse curriculum that benefits our entire society. That is a shame.

Nick Gibb: The hon. Lady interrupted my speech before I had concluded my arguments; she should hold on and be patient a little longer.

This week, we celebrate National Apprenticeship Week, which celebrates the success of apprenticeships across England. BSL is now an alternative to a level 1 and level 2 qualification in English when undertaking an apprenticeship, providing the opportunity for apprentices to achieve a qualification in their primary language. That enables those who use BSL to complete their apprenticeship without having to achieve another English qualification, such as a GCSE or functional skills qualification.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) referred to GCSEs in Urdu and other community languages, and the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) referred to teaching Russian and Japanese. Hon. Members will be aware that we had a very real struggle with the awarding organisations—the exam boards—to ensure that those small-cohort GCSEs continued. Ultimately, we are dependent on the exam boards accredited by Ofqual to offer GCSEs being willing to offer any further GCSEs.
Jim Fitzpatrick: Before the Minister moves on from his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), will he give further clarification? Will he refer later to the point that has been raised by a number of colleagues, which is that the Department for Education has already piloted a BSL GCSE that is ready to go? Why is the Department not in a position, not able or not willing to validate that for schools that want to teach the qualification in such a way rather than at NVQ level?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Gentleman pre-empts what I was about to say. He makes an important point and I will address it. Hon. Members should be aware that, of the four GCSE exam boards operating in this country—OCR, one of the major ones, recently stopped providing any language GCSEs at all, including French, Spanish and German, which are not small-cohort GCSEs. The hon. Gentleman mentions the GCSE that has been prepared by the awarding organisation Signature. We have seen that draft specification, and it has been tested in some schools. However, an established and rigorous process is in place to accredit GCSEs, and the specification has not been through that process.

A number of further steps are required to develop the specification into a GCSE, including developing broad and deep subject content by working with subject experts. It would also need to meet Ofqual’s assessment criteria and be accredited by Ofqual. Signature, were it to be the awarding organisation that offered the qualification, would need to be accredited by Ofqual as a GCSE-awarding organisation and be subject to its regulatory oversight. It is not a simple process of saying the qualification is already done and dusted and ready to run. A huge number of steps have to be gone through.

I presided over the reforms to GCSEs since 2010. The new GCSEs in English and maths were ready for first teaching in September 2015, and the next set were ready for first teaching in June 2016, with exams in June 2018. These GCSE reform and accreditation processes take a long time. The accreditation is not a simple thing to acquire from Ofqual, which often sends the specifications back for further drafting before it is prepared to accredit them.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to the Minister for that further clarification. Given the hoops that have to be jumped through to actually get to a position in which a GCSE will be available, is the Department in a position to say that it supports the additional efforts to get to that point, or is it not the Department’s role to encourage that? Where do we go from here to actually get to a position whereby there will be a BSL GCSE validated by the Department that can be taught and examined in schools?

Nick Gibb: We have been clear that we want schools to have a period of stability, so we have said that there are to be no new GCSEs or A-levels for a period of time. That is not to say that in the longer term we will not consider new subjects for GCSEs. However, it is important, after the hugely extensive reforms to GCSEs and A-levels, that schools have a period of stability. I have a responsibility to schools to enable them to have that period of stability, which they have asked us for.

Emma Hardy: Does the Minister agree that what we examine shows what we value as a society? What the Minister values is clear to anybody who wishes to read it in the changes he introduced to GCSEs. What message does it send out to people if we will not even consider having BSL as a GCSE? What does that say about what we value as a society?

Nick Gibb: I would argue that not everything that is taught in schools needs to be a GCSE. We allow plenty of valuable qualifications to be taught in schools under the section 96 list that have valuable subject content but are not sufficiently broad to qualify as a GCSE. However, we none the less encourage their teaching in our schools. As I have said, we value BSL as a subject, and we encourage schools that wish to do so to teach it. Schools are permitted to teach a number of qualifications at levels 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Rachael Maskell: I am really struggling. For the Minister and myself, English is our first language, and we have the right to sit a qualification at GCSE level in our first language. BSL could be the first language of the hearing impaired, yet we deny those people that opportunity, so a real inequality has therefore been built into the system. This is not about adding another subject to the curriculum but attaining equality for people who are hearing impaired.

Nick Gibb: As I said, we value BSL. However, a huge number of steps would have to be gone through for the BSL qualification to be accredited as a GCSE. Having been through it, I can say that it is not a simple process to get qualifications accredited. There are existing level 2 qualifications; GCSEs are level 2. There are existing BSL qualifications of high quality available that can be taught in schools. BSL is not a GCSE subject, but as I said, many subjects taught in schools are not GCSE subjects and none the less are valued by schools and by those who take the qualifications.

We recognise that some who wish to take a qualification in BSL will do so to communicate with a family member or friend. Indeed, many of those in most need are hearing parents of deaf children. We understand that early access to language is essential to help children to learn and thrive and it is vital that families have the support that they need to communicate with their children. The Department has provided funding for the development of a support guide to help parents of deaf children. Families or carers may also be eligible for support to learn sign language. The Department has provided funding for the I-Sign project to develop a family sign language programme, which is available online.

We believe that all young people should be helped to achieve their potential, regardless of their background or circumstances. More than 21,000 children with a hearing impairment are supported at school. We are proud that 93% of hearing-impaired children are supported to attend a mainstream school. Pupils who use sign language are generally provided with support at school through specialist teaching assistants and specialist teachers of the deaf. However, we do not prescribe how schools should support pupils with a hearing impairment.

We have made it clear in the special educational needs and disability code of practice that all schools must use their best endeavours to make suitable provision available for all children of school age with special educational needs or disabilities. The reasonable adjustments duty for schools and local authorities includes a duty to provide supporting aids and services for disabled pupils.
That could include things such as radio aids or communication support workers. In addition, the local authority can support parents and children in developing the knowledge that they need to communicate effectively.

When the time comes for pupils to take examinations, schools and colleges are responsible for ensuring that reasonable adjustments are made to make exams more accessible for pupils. Common arrangements include extra time and the use of scribes and readers and of word processors. More deaf children than ever are leaving school with good GCSEs, and we want them to continue to aspire to reach their full potential. Statistics show that attainment in English and maths for that group has been improving in recent years. The proportion of children with a hearing impairment achieving a standard pass—at grade 4 or above—in English and maths GCSE has increased by 6 percentage points compared with passes at C or above in 2011. We are very proud of that improvement.

Laura Smith: I am not interrupting; I just want to make a point to the Minister. It is wonderful that deaf people and deaf children are exceeding what has been achieved previously and doing well in terms of their attainment, but these are not equal opportunities. Surely it is the Government's responsibility to deliver equal opportunities for all children and all people in our society. I just do not feel that the Government are taking responsibility for this issue. We have heard that it is a matter for teachers and schools and can be a matter for local government. What about the Government?

Nick Gibb: I have explained the position as regards a GCSE. As I said, two thirds of schools have academy status, which means that they are not obliged to follow the national curriculum. That trend is increasing—the number of schools acquiring academy status increases every month—and, as I said, such schools are not obliged to follow the national curriculum.

I have also set out the very real practical issues. Any new GCSE has to go through an accreditation process. It has to be provided by an awarding organisation that is itself accredited as a GCSE provider. As I pointed out, we have had a real struggle with the awarding organisations on providing language GCSEs, particularly in the community languages. We had a huge battle with them and ended up having to move a whole raft of community language GCSEs from OCR to the other awarding organisations. Ultimately, we can only provide GCSEs that the exam boards, which are independent, wish to provide. As I said, a draft specification has been provided by Signature, but it would have to go through the process of having the GCSE accredited by Ofqual and would itself have to be accredited by Ofqual as a GCSE provider. Those are the issues confronting any Minister in the Department for Education as regards new GCSEs, because the system in the legislation passed in the House to ensure that we offer GCSEs that are on a par with one another and hold their standard over time has led to our deciding to have a very powerful regulator, which is absolutely right to ensure that we maintain standards. That process has to be gone through by anyone who wishes to introduce a new GCSE.

In addition, we want schools to have a period of stability. There will be stability for a short period, and after that we can consider whether new GCSEs or A-levels can be introduced.

Emma Hardy: I accept that not all schools have to teach the national curriculum, but what exists is not actually a national curriculum; it is an examination curriculum. The school curriculum is built around the examinations that children take. I am sorry, but I disagree with the point that there is a wider school curriculum. There is not. Schools long for there to be a wider school curriculum, but the reforms made by this Government have squeezed things out and narrowed it down very tightly to being based solely on examinations. If we do not give British Sign Language an examination, it just will not be counted and will not be taught.

Nick Gibb: There are examinations in BSL, produced by Signature and ABC, that are for level 1 or 2 qualifications. Exams exist in BSL. The qualifications are on the section 96 list and can be taught in schools, so they do exist.

I do not accept the caricature of our school system described by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy). The school curriculum is very wide. The most successful schools in the state sector have a very wide curriculum and they offer plenty of sport, music and art as part of that. Art and music are compulsory to the end of key stage 3, and the schools that are most successful academically, in the exams that the hon. Lady dismisses, are the schools that also have a very broad and balanced curriculum beyond GCSE.

We made it very clear in our reforms to the national curriculum that there was to be a distinction between the national curriculum, which focuses on the core academic subjects, and the school curriculum, which goes beyond those subjects and includes sport and a whole raft of artistic and other subjects, which are hugely important. I am referring to subjects such as sex and relationships education, PSHE—personal, social, health and economic education—and citizenship and so on, which are hugely important in developing a rounded person.

Rachael Maskell: I am struggling to understand why the Minister cannot ask an awarding body to go away and do the work to ensure that a GCSE in British Sign Language can come on stream and then be integrated in the school system, by which time the schools will clearly have had their period of stability and then will be able to teach BSL as part of their core curriculum.

Nick Gibb: I am always very happy to have meetings and discussions on these issues. I continue to have discussions with people who want to introduce a whole raft of new subject content into our schools, and I am very happy to be having a meeting next week with my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney to discuss this very issue, so we always keep these issues under review. Today I have set out the real challenges facing the school system in this country and I have put on the record in an open and transparent way where we are on the issue of new GCSEs coming into our system. That is what I have sought to do today, and on that basis I conclude my remarks.
5.59 pm

Liz Twist: I thank all hon. Members who made contributions to the debate. Most of it was fairly upbeat. It is a shame about the ending, but I will come on to that.

I thank the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for his support for the cause. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on deafness; my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy); and my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who so powerfully reminded us that it is we who are erecting barriers, not people who have hearing difficulties or deafness, which is an important point to remember. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for her contribution and my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). Some really interesting and exciting points were made, all of them supporting the need for us to be more inclusive and to reach out and include young people with deafness, about whom we are talking today.

Then we come to the Minister’s comments. I have to say that I was really disappointed. I asked the Minister to go further than he had in his written response. I am disappointed that we have not been able to go further today. I heard all the reasons he gave, but we need a can-do approach. We have a problem and we need to find a way around it, so that all our young people can take part not only in school activities, but in life in the wider community, through the development of a BSL GCSE and the inclusion of BSL as a curriculum subject. I remain convinced, having been a governor in a number of schools, that it is really difficult to find time to teach BSL, although it is allowed. I look forward to his further discussions with the APPG.

I hope that there will be a change in the future to include BSL in the national curriculum and to recognise a GCSE qualification. I do not think that Wayne and his mates, Erin and other young people are going away. I think we will hear much more about this issue in the next few days. I am reminded that next week is Sign Language Week. I think there will be a lot going around among the Twitterati and the public about this, so watch out for a lot more questions from the public, as well as from hon. Members, on this issue.

To finish, I remind everyone that although we have spent a lot of time talking about the national curriculum and GCSEs, this is all about allowing deaf young people to be included in activities and school life, and to just have some fun, like Wayne and his mates do. I thank hon. Members and I am sure we will come back to this issue.

Ian Austin (in the Chair): Before Members leave, I want to formally thank the interpreters who have been translating this debate into BSL, the people who have been organising the live simultaneous interpretation on television, and the Officers of the House who have made all of this possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered e-petition 200000 relating to British Sign Language being part of the national curriculum.

6.3 pm

Sitting suspended.
If insurers had to cover the vehicle itself and were not able to take driver-specific factors into account in their pricing, then the cost of insurance would likely rise for those with a good driving record and history of driving safely.”

That is the Government’s response, which I hope we will hear the Minister develop later.

That all gives rise to the question: how much further in-depth consideration should we grant the petition? To my mind, there are three key issues in respect of motor vehicles and insurance. First, how does the proposal impact on the cost to the consumer purchasing the insurance? Secondly, does it help people in the unfortunate situation of being injured by another party? That relates specifically to individuals driving without insurance. While the guilty party may be punished through the law, that rarely helps the innocent party with their car repair costs. Finally, and vitally, does the policy help or hinder road safety? I will not go through those questions in sequence in this debate, but they are worthy of our consideration.

To move on to evidence-based research, the Association of British Insurers found that on average, young drivers spend about 10% of their salaries on insuring their cars. It is therefore clear that action needs to be taken to stem rising motor insurance premiums. Analysis by the Association of British Insurers shows that drivers aged between 18 and 21 are paying an average of £973 for comprehensive car cover. Rising motor insurance bills, resulting from a range of factors including the way in which compensation payouts are calculated and a resurgence in whiplash-style claims, are hitting younger drivers hardest.

There have been many concerns about the car insurance industry, and the integrity of the market has been questioned. As a result of complaints about the sector, the Competition Commission investigated and concluded in 2013 that there were “features of the UK market for motor insurance and related goods or services that, either alone or in combination, prevent, restrict or distort competition such that there are adverse effects on competition.”

A research paper by the House of Commons Library about the motor insurance industry notes that many people consider the UK car insurance market to be dysfunctional. The paper cites the unpredictable rise and fall of insurance premiums. The research also references the relationship between the industry and car hire, repair and legal claims firms, which some view with suspicion.

I understand the frustration of the petitioner and the many signatories at high car insurance premiums and what could be viewed as the inflexibility of the UK insurance market. A different system—one that means that if a car is insured, anyone with a valid driving licence can drive it—certainly seems to offer one solution to the UK’s sometimes complicated and expensive system, but let me consider that further.

The cost of insuring a car is calculated using a variety of factors. Driver-specific factors include the driver’s age and experience, their road safety history, where they use and keep the car, and how often they use it. Since December 2012, car insurance companies can no longer discriminate on the basis of gender. Factors that depend on the car itself include its power and value. Insurance companies seek to set premium rates such that total premium income at least matches the total amount paid out in claims. Under that system, the people deemed the least likely to have an accident and to claim on their insurance pay the least, while those considered at greatest risk of making an insurance claim pay the highest premiums.

If insurance followed the car, rather than the driver, and driver-specific factors used to calculate risks could not be used. That could mean that drivers with a history of driving safely would have to pay higher premiums. That would be likely, as insurance companies would be unable to recover the costs of paying out claims by charging the drivers at greatest risk. It could give rise to an unfair and expensive system that would not reward safe drivers at all.

The petition states that if insurance was on the car alone and was not driver-specific, friends and family would be able to share a car “without paying for multiple insurances.”

In reality, is that not de facto the case under the current motor insurance system? Named drivers can be added to insurance policies, allowing more than one person to be insured to drive the same car. The main driver uses the car most frequently, while named drivers use it less—none the less, they can use it frequently. That great oracle beloved of so many, the price comparison website MoneySuperMarket.com, has research showing that 35% of young drivers who are the main driver on their own insurance have a named driver on their insurance, thereby making their premiums up to 13% cheaper.

Car hire firms work on the basis that a car is insured such that anyone can use it. Many business fleets are insured on a similar basis. However, in both cases there will be a variety of restrictions. Hire cars are often only available to those over 25. While fleet operators have extensive bargaining power, there will still be restrictions: the person driving a business car will, for instance, usually have to be over a certain age and an employee of the firm.

Under some fully comprehensive driving insurance policies, one’s own insurance means that it is possible to drive someone else’s car—with their permission, naturally. However, restrictions are often placed on that type of benefit. When driving a car that is not one’s own, cover is often on a third-party basis, so insurance will pay only for damage to other vehicles or property. Another possible type of insurance is for temporary cover on another person’s vehicle.

The petition cites the USA and Portugal as countries with a motor insurance system that requires insurance only of the car and not the driver. Such a principle is out there, and it is good to examine, and sometimes to copy, effective working practices from other countries. I certainly believe that that is worth doing here; however, I strike a note of caution, because on closer inspection the motor insurance model in both those countries is more complicated than it first appears.

In the United States of America, liability insurance follows the driver and covers them when they drive a vehicle other than their own. All states apart from New Hampshire require at least liability insurance. Comprehensive and collision auto insurance are tied to the vehicle; however, if someone other than the insured drives a vehicle covered by comprehensive insurance and is not listed as a covered driver, they may not be covered in an accident.
[Susan Elan Jones]

In Portugal, the vehicle and not the individual is insured; however, vehicles are generally insured to be driven by specific categories of driver. For example, if a car were insured for a category of drivers aged over 45, a sober driver aged under 45 would not be eligible to drive it. In Portugal, it is possible to insure a car with comprehensive cover for any driver. In practice, however, the driver often has to be over 30. Research from the Library suggests that comprehensive cover can be harder to get in Portugal than in the UK.

Driving without insurance in the UK is illegal—and quite right, too. Even if our model of insurance changed, I have no doubt that driving without insurance would remain illegal. The police can give a fixed penalty of £300 and six penalty points to someone caught driving a vehicle that they are not insured to drive. If the case goes to court, the uninsured driver can be made to pay an unlimited fine and be disqualified from driving.

The police also have the power to seize and, in some cases, destroy the vehicle that is being driven uninsured. There is a strong case for that practice. It encourages safe driving and compensates innocent parties for any injuries or damage to their vehicles or property as a result of a motor accident.

Although I extol some aspects of the current system, the Government need to take action to deal with rapidly rising premiums. We are not short of journalists and researchers who have made that point. In 2015, James Delingpole of The Spectator expressed it thus:

“The car insurance industry is a disgusting racket. It’s designed so that as many industries as possible can get their snouts in the trough.”

That may be hyperbole, but there is a definite need for cartel-like issues—or at least, the perception of cartel-like issues—to be examined. Reform of the motor insurance sector is necessary. I have little doubt that high insurance premiums and the perceived unfairness of the sector are leading to demand for change.

The petition does not provide a silver-bullet solution, although it is worthy of discussion and contains some interesting ideas. However, even if the petition’s answer is not the very best on offer, the Government should look seriously at it and other suggestions, including introducing graduated driving licences, freezing the rate of insurance premium tax and implementing planned reforms to the way in which lower-value, whiplash-style claims are handled. It is abundantly clear that the status quo on motor insurance premiums is not an option, and on that the Government must act. I thank the petitioners for bringing the issue to this Chamber today.

6.23 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones). She did a good job of introducing the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I will pick up on one of the issues she mentioned: graduated driving licences.

This petition is about trying to get the cost of insurance down. I am sure that we all support that, particularly for young people. The cost of their insurance is around £950 a year on average, which is prohibitively expensive for many of them. We all want young people to have the freedom and confidence to be able to drive and to develop their driving skills after they have passed their test, but the cost makes that difficult for many of them.

Young people’s insurance is so expensive because they are involved in many of the accidents that happen on our roads. People under the age of 24 drive about 5% of the miles driven in this country, but they are involved in 18% of accidents. In many ways, I can understand why young drivers bear the heaviest burden of insurance costs.

The issue came to my attention after the death of the son of two constituents. They do not want to be named or to receive lots of attention. They are working through their grief privately, and they wish to continue to do that. I will say a bit about what happened, which I do not think will identify them. Their adult son was killed by a learner driver in extremely bad weather conditions shortly before he was going to become a father for the first time. They have worked through a legal process but, as hon. Members can imagine, many lives have been devastated by this event.

My constituents raised the possibility of introducing a graduated driving licence system in the UK—something that has been raised with Ministers previously. Indeed, I raised it at Prime Minister’s questions a few weeks ago, and the Prime Minister gave a very positive response and offered to look into it. As the Minister is present, I will take the opportunity to go into further detail about why the Government ought to explore it.

Places that have a graduated driving licence include New Zealand, some parts of the United States, and Northern Ireland, where the system was recently introduced. The system supports novice drivers, who are young drivers who have recently passed their test, rather than all drivers under 24. In the UK, a 17-year-old can be fully licensed in just a few months, and 89% of young drivers complete less than 40 hours of tuition before taking their test.

A graduated licence could include different measures to ensure that drivers gain more experience before they can drive on any roads in any circumstances with any passengers. I am not being particularly prescriptive about which of the possible graduated licensing measures are appropriate for this country, but I think the Government ought to look at the system in principle. It would not necessarily be right to adopt what has been done in Canada and replicate it here; the system needs to be appropriate for the way that we drive and for our custom and practice.

There could be a learner stage, as we have now, but with a minimum learning period. That would mean that an amount of experience would have to be gained and a number of hours would have to be completed before somebody took their test. Some of that ought to be under the supervision of a qualified instructor, to ensure that there is some quality of instruction—not just instruction that is sufficient to get a driver through a test, but some in-depth learning under a qualified instructor.

I appreciate that learner drivers go out, perhaps with their parents, who may not be qualified instructors, to get some experience of driving, and that is entirely appropriate. However, the accompanying person ought to be over the age of 25 to ensure that they have greater experience. It does not sound very safe for someone who has recently taken their test and who has virtually
no experience to take somebody out to get some experience of driving. As the mother of two teenage sons who will shortly, no doubt, want to learn to drive, the whole idea fills me with an enormous amount of dread.

After someone has taken their test, there could be a novice driver stage, which we do not have at the moment, in which they could drive unsupervised. We would have to discuss or consult on whether restrictions should be imposed at that stage. Ought there to be restrictions on carrying passengers younger than 25, unless the driver is a young parent? Obviously we would not want to place that restriction on a 24-year-old parent who has taken their driving test because they need to take their child to school. I suspect that somebody driving a young child around would be incredibly careful and mindful of what they were doing.

We ought also to consider time restrictions, because many accidents that involve young drivers take place between 11 pm and 6 am. We ought to find some way of limiting young drivers to daylight hours during their novice period, for their benefit and for their parents’ peace of mind—unless, of course, they want to get to work or college.

Perhaps a zero-alcohol policy should be imposed on young drivers so that they can benefit from clarity. I am sure the Government have considered such a policy for all drivers, but the data shows that alcohol is an especially significant risk factor for young drivers. We could also consider restricting engine size, or introducing an additional driving test after a certain period to ensure that new drivers have reached the desired standard, that they can drive as we all do and that they would benefit from complete freedom.

There has been much campaigning on the subject in recent years. It has been estimated that more than 400 deaths or serious injuries each year could be prevented by introducing a graduated licensing approach. Public support seems to be growing: a survey by the RAC Foundation found that two thirds of adults and 41% of young drivers would support the introduction of a graduated driving licence, 84% are in favour of a minimum learning period, 70% support a zero-tolerance alcohol policy, and 90% support mandatory lessons on motorways and in difficult conditions for all learners.

Nothing can bring my constituents’ son back. The young learner driver who was responsible will have it on his conscience for the rest of their life, and it must have been a horrific experience for them and for their driving instructor. My constituents make a good argument that, under a more sensible licensing system, the learner driver would not have been out in such horrendous conditions and the accident might not have happened.

Where possible, I am very careful to walk instead of taking the car out when the weather is very bad, as it has been in north-east England over the past week. Even people with a great deal of experience think twice about driving in such conditions. We need learner drivers to experience all weather conditions and types of road, and to be able to drive in the dark, fog and rain, but it needs to be taught in stages. Confidence and the ability to react quickly, look around, notice and anticipate what will happen can be learned only by experience.

How seriously are the Government thinking about acting on the issue? Are they prepared to enter into discussions and consultations with interested parties about changing our system and introducing a graduated licensing system?

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) on introducing the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee in her characteristically balanced and thoughtful style. She presented it very well. I particularly liked the way in which she highlighted how the petition’s suggestion of insuring cars rather than drivers might help to limit the number of uninsured drivers on the road. In my experience, a lot of the uninsured drivers who cause problems tend to be uninsured for reasons other than cost—they may have lost their licences for various offences, or they may be serial offenders—so insuring cars might not completely eradicate the problem, but it is certainly worth considering.

I also liked the way in which the hon. Lady highlighted the key issues that should be considered before changing insurance legislation, including cost, personal injury, the possibility of helping the innocent to achieve justice, and overall safety—an issue that the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) picked up on when she spoke about graduated licences.

The hon. Member for Clwyd South also highlighted the possible dysfunction in the market. There is no doubt that many people are cynical about how the insurance market operates, so it is always good to shine a light on it and have transparency. She mentioned insurance premium tax, which was increased a couple of years ago in yet another Budget whammy. The cost of insurance for young drivers is a major issue. The hon. Lady asked the Minister to consider freezing insurance premium tax; I would like the Government to go further and consider introducing age restrictions on it. The cost of insurance for young people is so prohibitive that the extra 10% or 12% on top of their already big premiums is a real hit.

The hon. Member for Darlington mentioned insurance premiums and then raised a matter that was perhaps a bit off topic but that is clearly very important, because she is supporting her constituents in a case that has been really harrowing for them. I certainly understand the arguments for a graduated driving licence scheme and I look forward to the Minister’s response. The hon. Lady’s teenage sons might not appreciate such a scheme, and nor might many other young people, but in the light of the wider consequences for safety, we have to consider the matter seriously. I commend her for raising it.

It is clear that the issue is not as simplistic as car-only versus driver-only insurance, as the petition suggests. The United States system imposes liability insurance requirements on drivers, and many US car insurance policies include restrictions, although they may be as simple as a requirement for a manual driving licence—many cars in the States are automatic and many people have automatic-only licences. The Association of British Insurers lists other considerations relevant to a change in the market system, such as experience with particular types of vehicle or age profiling. In the UK, insurance policies include restrictions on the age and experience of drivers. It is not quite as simple as someone insuring a car and then all their friends and family being fully insured to drive it.

The petition is loosely based on the situation in Portugal, but as the hon. Member for Clwyd South correctly highlighted, the market in Portugal is not
straightforward either. I know from experience that in the United Kingdom it is possible, even under the current market set-up, to insure a car such that drivers other than the named driver are fully insured to drive it. My dad’s car has been insured for many years to cover any valid driver who has his permission to drive it and who holds the necessary licence, although I believe there are some restrictions relating to penalty points and minimum age, so it is clearly possible to get car insurance that includes the flexibility for friends and family to drive.

I, too, have a teenage son, so I can certainly see the arguments and attractions of a car-only insurance premium, which might make driving less cost-prohibitive for young drivers. Certainly my 18-year-old son, Dylan, advocates such a system, because he thinks it will magically reduce his premiums. Clearly, however, it could reduce premiums for him only if we all pay a much higher share ourselves, so again there would be winners and losers, although it might make the market slightly easier for young drivers to enter into.

As the hon. Member for Clwyd South highlighted, this petition has a decent number of signatures—56,000. Last week, when I first got notification of the debate, I thought it had 45,000 signatures, so there has been a considerable increase in the past week or so, which I imagine must be due to the interest generated by this debate. At the least, this debate is highlighting an issue for more people to think about.

Only eight of my constituents have signed the petition, so it is fair to say that it has not really caught the imagination of my constituents, or of others; perhaps that is why the Chamber is not quite as busy as it might be for some other petition-led debates. Of course, that does not invalidate the legitimacy of bringing forward the debate and allowing Members of Parliament to consider the issue, and to challenge the Government to consider the possible change that has been highlighted in the debate.

The scenario given in the petition is that a group of friends goes out drinking, and the driver who is responsible for the vehicle gets drunk and cannot drive it. If the car was insured through a car insurance policy, another driver—one of his friends—could drive it home. For me, it is not necessarily a credible proposition to introduce primary legislation for such a scenario. I suggest that education and better planning by people going on a night out is the best way to deal with that scenario. Otherwise, it might end up with somebody driving the car who does not have experience of that car, and if his friends are intoxicated he might not get responsible instructions on how to operate the car. As I see it, that would impose risks rather than being a benefit.

Ironically, if the future of the driving world is as predicted by the Government and many experts, we will have autonomous vehicles taking over rather than driver-led vehicles. In the bright, new, shiny world of the future, we will have driverless cars and therefore, in that scenario I just mentioned—friends going on a night out—there would not be a designated driver, because there would be an autonomous vehicle that could pick people up and safely take them home.

I sat on the Bill Committee for the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill, in which the Government are legislating for car-only insurance for autonomous vehicles, because the risk model and functionality of those cars, as opposed to driver-led cars, mean that the insurance industry is saying that they need to be insured on a car basis, rather than on a driver basis. That is going through the legislative process at the moment and it may be that driver-led insurance gets phased out in the future.

The reality is that insurance is a risk-based market, so for the insurance market to function properly the insurance companies need to be able to assess the risk and quantify that risk to be able to set premiums. If they get it wrong, there are two scenarios. If they get it wrong and charge too much, they make excessive profits and those paying for insurance pay even higher premiums. If they get the risk model wrong, frankly they will go bankrupt, and if more companies went bankrupt there would be a shrinking market, which could lead to the worst cartel or monopoly situation. That would invariably drive up insurance premiums in the long run.

I will conclude by saying that we should never say never in terms of the changes that might happen, and I will be pleased to hear the Government’s response to the debate. At the moment, however, I am tempted to agree with the initial Government response to the petition—namely, that the change might not be the silver bullet we hope for and might not give the greater flexibility or the reduced premiums that we are looking for. I think that, on balance, the initial Government response is probably correct, but I would certainly like to hear what the Minister has to say about some of the other matters that have been raised today.

6.44 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

I congratulate the Petitions Committee on bringing this matter forward for debate and the hon. Members who have spoken tonight, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) and for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), and the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). I found it particularly moving when my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington mentioned what sadly happened to her constituents, and my heart goes out to them.

Although the petition focuses on one area of reform in the insurance industry, it gives us the opportunity to discuss many other important issues in respect of the high price of car insurance, especially for young people. It is worth pointing out that, while wages have stagnated, the cost of living has increased and premiums for young people have continued to soar. We have heard tonight that analysis by the Association of British Insurers shows that 10% of the average salary of drivers aged between 18 and 21 is now being used to pay their motor insurance bills, which come to an average of £973 for comprehensive cover. That is obviously quite a sum, equating to five times the average premium for all drivers, and it is indeed a significant weight on young people.

The current UK insurance enforcement mechanisms are based on checking that each vehicle is covered by insurance, and insurance is priced according to the risk of a claim, as perceived by the insurance company. Factors that affect this risk include the age and gender of the driver, the type of vehicle and where the vehicle is
usually kept or used. The petition seeks to limit the impact of the first of those factors, and it would significantly benefit younger and older drivers.

Of course, there are examples of where the car and not the person is insured. Hire car firms work on that basis, as do many business fleets. Therefore, the argument could be made that the change being proposed would just be an extension of something that is already in existence under English law. However, it is worth noting that both hire car firms and business fleets are frequently restricted to drivers over a certain age, and there is the possibility that if we moved to a car-based scheme to give cheaper insurance to young people, they could be denied insurance completely due to the same sort of age filter being applied. Where insurers could not enforce an age ban, they would certainly continue to set premium rates, such that total income matches total claims. That could result in the people who make the fewest claims paying more for their insurance than the people who make the most claims.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South mentioned in her speech, the current system allows insurers to offer a customer a tailored premium to meet their individual needs. If the car rather than the individual was insured, insurers would not have the information to assess the risk of the likely driver and could not underwrite that risk based on the driver’s profile. Also, vehicle technology is changing at a rapid pace, particular models are changing and the features of vehicles vary greatly. That makes the risk profile and relevance of a driver’s experience even more significant.

A change to a car-based model of insurance would mean a redesign of all the systems that car insurers currently use to assess risk and calculate quotes. It is fair to say that that could be a complex, lengthy and costly exercise. My worry would be that any costs incurred by the insurer would be passed on to the customer.

The reality is that there is no one solution to the issue of high premiums for young drivers, however much one might be sympathetic to the problems they face. The insurance industry will always come back to the point that statistically young drivers are, sadly, more likely to be involved in motor accidents than drivers over the age of 25. That issue needs to be tackled from a road safety perspective, which is why many of us feel that there needs to be a Green Paper from the Government on the issue of young drivers and safety.

Indeed, in March 2013 the Department for Transport released a press release that stated:

“Government to overhaul young driver rules in bid to improve safety and cut insurance costs.”

It also said:

“Green paper on improving the safety and reducing risks to young drivers launched.”

It is now 2018—five years later—and we are still waiting to see that Green Paper. Despite calls from road safety campaigners and the insurance industry, the Government no longer appear to be addressing the issue. As far as I am aware, there is no sign of a Green Paper on young drivers at the moment, although I would be very grateful if the Minister could update us. If the Government are serious about doing something to address the core issues affecting the cost of car insurance for young people, they would bring forward this work. I ask the Minister when he is thinking of doing that. If he is not considering doing so, why not?

A Green Paper could look at a number of areas. Telematics, or in-car black boxes, have been hugely successful in bringing down the cost of premiums. They enable insurers to assess real-time data on an individual driver’s behaviour and to charge more accurate risk-based premiums as a result—in some cases, new drivers can see their premiums fall by one fifth or more. Currently, black boxes are subject to VAT, which pushes up the cost for insurers and drivers. Given that the evidence shows that the technology can help to reduce the number of road accidents, surely the question is whether it would be appropriate for the VAT to be removed.

The Green Paper could also address graduated licensing, which the Association of British Insurers believes would have a positive impact. As we have heard, that involves considering how and when individuals can drive after passing their test and it is in operation in some overseas jurisdictions, including Canada. There could be restrictions on the time of day a young driver could drive or on the number of passengers they could have. In countries where graduated licensing has been implemented, it has been proven to lower death and accident rates among young drivers. That is a significant point, as I hope all Members here tonight will agree.

However, such a scheme raises a number of concerns. For example, would it lead to unreasonable curfews on young drivers? What if it led to a young driver being forbidden to travel at night when they could be required to start work early in the morning? The wrong sort of graduated scheme could restrict opportunities and be unfair as a result. I have given only a couple of examples because I am conscious of time, but a Green Paper could explore many other areas that could improve safety for young drivers.

I also want to raise road safety targets. Other parts of the world, and many international bodies of which we are part, back such targets and feel that they should be supported widely. The last Labour Government brought in road safety targets before, sadly, they were abolished by the coalition Government. Road safety targets play an important role in focusing minds and contribute indirectly, as a result, to a fall in the number of young people killed or seriously injured and recorded as road casualty statistics. I am afraid that we are seeing a worrying rise in the number of people who are seriously injured or killed on the roads, with Government figures showing a 4% increase on the previous year in the numbers killed in 2016—the highest level since 2011—and an 8.5% increase in the numbers killed or seriously injured. I wonder, therefore, whether the Minister will consider reintroducing those targets.

This has been a constructive and important debate, and important and thoughtful points have been made by Members from across the House. I do not believe that the proposal in the petition would be the best way to tackle high insurance premiums for young people, for the reasons I have covered. There is no silver bullet, I am afraid. It is time we had a Green Paper on young drivers, so that the Government could have a detailed, rounded, comprehensive look at the matter. It is also time to bring back road safety targets and allow ourselves a longer-term vision of a much safer and, as a result, much better road network, with the numbers killed or injured reduced. Other countries have piloted a zero vision and there is no reason why we should not have such a vision. Road safety targets would be a vital component in achieving that.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I would say I was speechless at the joy, except that I have to make a speech. I thank the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) for opening the debate as she did on the important subject of insuring cars rather than the individuals who drive them. I also thank all hon. Members for their contributions, and I welcome the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) to his position on the shadow Front Bench. It will be a delight to address some of his points.

I hope I can assure hon. Members that the Government take the cost of motor insurance seriously and are committed to ensuring that it is reasonable for all motorists. To do that, we have sought to identify the root causes of high insurance premiums and to address them directly, but we have no plans to change the current motor insurance system, as stated in our response to the petition, and there appears to be consensus across all the parties whose Members contributed to the debate that that is the correct position.

I will first outline the system and some of the issues and then come on to all the important questions raised by colleagues from across the House. The UK was one of the first countries in the world to recognise the benefit of compulsory motor insurance, back in 1930. Our long-standing approach has been that it is an individual’s use of a vehicle that has to be insured. The current system of insuring individual drivers, rather than vehicles, does not, as has been noted, prevent named drivers from being added to an insurance policy for shorter or longer periods, which can be a cost-effective way for friends or relatives who share a car to be included on a single policy. For a typical family of four sharing a car, the saving with a named-driver policy rather than each family member having their own policy has been estimated to be more than £1,000. There are also new insurance products coming on to the market that facilitate short-term cover, including insurance by the hour and car-sharing arrangements, without the need to change insurance law. Such products make it easy to arrange cover for someone else using your car. One new car insurance app quotes an average of £10.90 for an hour’s coverage, which can be set up at very short notice, and I am sure we can expect further developments of such pay-as-you-drive solutions in the coming years.

It is important to note, as colleagues have, that it is not at all clear that changing the system would reduce the cost of insurance. In fact, there is every reason to think it could raise it. The complexity involved in changing the system would have significant cost implications, yet would not necessarily produce tangible benefits for the consumer. Some countries opt for a car-based rather than a driver-based system because they have no-fault legal regimes, under which each insurer compensates their own policyholder. So it is a question not just of how people purchase insurance but of the wider civil law principle of liability, which is different in the UK from those other countries. Changing our motor insurance system would almost certainly, therefore, involve complex legal changes and require detailed consultation. A change in the underlying legislation would mean that all insurers would need to redesign the systems they used to offer quotes, which, as the hon. Member for Reading East hinted, would be a complex and lengthy exercise and could have significant cost implications for both the industry and, in due course, consumers. Given the alternative solutions available, such as adding a named driver or adding “drive other car” options to motor insurance policies, such significant reforms would be disproportionate.

The price of insurance currently depends on a range of factors, including many that are driver-specific: driving history, including previous claims and unspent drink-driving convictions; the use made of the vehicle, for example, whether for commuting or business; and years of driving experience. If insurers were required to cover the vehicle and were not able to take such factors into account in their pricing, the cost of insurance would likely rise for those with a good driving record and a history of safe driving and they would end up bearing, on a net basis, the additional costs of drivers who were not as careful or safe. The evidence for that is that insurers already tend to charge much higher premiums for any-driver insurance policies, under which less good drivers can join a named driver. Named-driver policies allow friends or relatives who share a car to be included on a single policy and provide the insurance provider with the necessary information to assess the potential risk of each individual.

Turning, as one or two colleagues have already done, to the scenario used in the petition, I wish to note that it is based on a drink-driving situation. Three friends need to get home from a night out, two of whom, including the driver, are under the influence of alcohol and are unable to drive. The petition suggests that a system that insured the vehicle would enable the third friend to drive the group home. However, as has been mentioned, the risk could be significantly greater than is suggested. As has been noted, the owner’s friend may never have driven the vehicle and may have much less overall driving experience or a significantly worse claims history. In an era where vehicle technology is changing rapidly, the variety between newer and older cars is only getting greater, so the driver’s individual experience of a particular make and model of car will have increased significance.

We have to think about the cost of covering vehicles, not people, as well as the incentive that creates. If that group knows that one of its members—they may be the least experienced driver—will be sober, that could create an incentive that removes the restraint on people’s drinking. There may therefore be collateral unexpected consequences, even within the scenario that was set out. That by no means means that the Government are not determined to seek to reduce the cost of insurance, and it is important to make that clear. We have no plans to change the current system, but that does not mean we are not tackling other key issues known to drive up the cost of premiums, several of which have been discussed today.

One issue that has not been discussed is that of the measures we are taking to tackle the high rate of fraudulent, minor and exaggerated whiplash claims. The scale of the problem is highlighted by the fact that 85% of personal injury claims made in 2016-17 relating to road traffic accidents were labelled as whiplash or soft tissue injuries to the neck and back. I am afraid these data are four or five years old, but that figure compares with 30% in France and Denmark, 31% in Spain, 35% in the Netherlands and 68% in Italy, which is a bit more like us. A large number of claims management companies...
actively encourage claims after even minor crashes, thereby potentially exacerbating the problem. The magnitude of costs that insurers inherit from whiplash claims is often passed on to consumers through higher insurance premiums, raising the cost overall.

In February 2017, the Government announced a robust package of reforms to crack down on minor, fraudulent and exaggerated whiplash claims. The measures will be introduced in a civil liability Bill in due course. Subject to parliamentary time and consideration, the Government aim to implement the whiplash measures as a package in April 2019. It is estimated that the reforms will bring down the cost of motor insurance by around £35 a policy. Leading insurers, such as Aviva, have publicly committed to passing on savings through lower premiums. Motor insurance operates under something of a cloud, as we recognise, and has often been criticised on competition grounds, as colleagues have noted. In many ways, however, it is an intensely competitive industry, and insurers will have to under pressure to pass on savings or risk being priced out of the market. We as the Government will monitor the industry’s reaction to the reforms and will consider further action if required.

I want to pick up on some of the points that Members have raised, which include some important issues that are collateral to the petition, but are important for us to touch on. The hon. Member for Clwyd South mentioned that she had three key tests for legislation in this area. The first was the effect on costs, the second was the effect on the innocent party and the third was whether it would help or hinder road safety. I hope she will recognise that one of the unintended consequences might be to push up the cost of personal injury claims. The UK is famed for its relatively high level of personal injury claims, which is one reason why it yields whiplash claims. Those claims are one of the things funded by insurance premiums. The downside is higher costs, and we have identified that problem, but the upside is that personal injury claims tend to get paid out at a higher level in this country. We are keen to ensure that the link between driver insurance and driver behaviour is maintained precisely to maintain personal accountability.

The hon. Lady, like the hon. Members for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and for Reading East, was absolutely right to note the high cost of young people’s insurance claims and the higher risk that young people face in their motoring. In answer to the question raised by the hon. Member for Reading East, I cannot comment on what the coalition Government did or did not promise about the 12% insurance premium tax, but I can tell him that these issues are of enormous interest and importance to the Government. We have commissioned a lot of work under our Driver 2020 programme, which is specifically designed to explore different forms of intervention that can bear on young people and improve their driving and therefore their insurability. That includes work on hazard perception, simulated training, education, parental engagement, data recorders, telematics and the rest. That is important.

To respond to the hon. Member for Darlington, we absolutely have not ruled out some form of graduated driver licence. We do not think it is the right policy at the moment but we are looking to work on this. As the Minister has said, we are considering that for precisely this reason. It falls into a wider desire across Government and certainly on my part to reduce the risk to young drivers, particularly in rural areas.

In my county of Herefordshire, I went to an extraordinary demonstration organised by the local fire service called Dying 2 Drive. It is run in connection with the ELY Memorial Trust, which is a wonderful local charity dedicated to helping prevent road accidents for young people. It is the most petrifying experience. Young people in sixth forms are exposed to a road traffic accident with fatalities right there. The situation in front of them is then solved through an intervention by the fire service and the police. It is a very moving experience. It is very hard to see it and drive without great care and attention thereafter, and the evidence is that it is very effective. I would like to see it rolled out by all kinds of fire services. It underlines the wide range of interventions that can be used to try to help this problem of young people at risk on our roads.

I will pick up a couple of other points that have been made. Adverse consequences are a theme that everyone has rightly touched on. We all recognise that the cost of premiums is higher than we would like, particularly for certain groups in society. We are determined to adopt a series of reforms—I have talked about whiplash and the work being done on young people—to try to reduce the high premiums and their impact on particular groups, but we have to be aware of the law of unintended consequences and the danger that such reforms may inadvertently drive up costs and premiums. Costs may be reallocated to people in a way that undermines the incentives to drive well and drive safely. It would be a disaster if we had those counterintuitive and counteractive results.

I am grateful to all Members who have contributed and to the hon. Member for Clwyd South for introducing the debate.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for giving way just as he was finishing. In terms of the costs for young drivers, I mentioned the fact that the extra 12% insurance premium tax is a further hurdle for those drivers to overcome. Could the Government look at reforming that?

Jesse Norman: It is hard to respond to that question, because it is about a tax and is therefore handled by the Treasury, rather than my Department. Also, it is not a tax that falls specifically on young people, but on the industry as a whole. As with any tax, one should consider not only the tax but the things it is intended to pay for and might be paying for, whether that is reducing debt or funding public services. The point I would make to the hon. Gentleman is that over the past few years the Department has pioneered a continuous insurance enforcement system that has significantly reduced the number of uninsured drivers by some 40%. Again, we take the point about the concern, but we specifically want to address the cause of it, which is the number of uninsured drivers. That is the core point of the remark.

To wind up, I am grateful to colleagues across the House and the hon. Member for Clwyd South for introducing this debate. I am grateful to the Petitions Committee for putting it on our docket. We all recognise that the cost of car insurance is an important issue for
all motorists. That is why the Government are committed to the things we have discussed tonight: tackling fraudulent whiplash claims, working with the motor insurance market, keeping premiums as low as they can be and addressing the risks and concerns that relate to young people and those in rural areas. I hope on that basis that the House will be satisfied.

7.9 pm

Susan Elan Jones: Again, I want to put on the record my thanks and those of the Petition Committee to the creator of the petition and to its signatories. It is rare in this place to have an in-depth discussion on car insurance. In my seven and three-quarter years as a Member I cannot remember a time when we have looked at car insurance and, in the same breath, road safety, but today’s debate has done that.

I want to pay a special tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) for her comments on the graduated licence. As she was speaking I thought back to my time as a sixth former when some friends who had passed their driving tests before me kindly offered to take me round the roads and country lanes of north Wales. It was an immensely enjoyable experience and absolutely useless in terms of driving practice to pass a test. I failed my driving test on three occasions until I went to university and passed on the streets of Bristol. I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend that there is a very strong case for a graduated licence. I also agree about the alcohol restrictions of which she spoke. I hope that if that idea ever sees the light of day we could see car insurance premiums for young people reduced, and also greater safety on our roads, which cannot come a day too soon.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) mentioned a Green Paper, which I would welcome. The Minister has not exactly ruled it out and I hope that that might be considered in future. In today’s debate we have been able to look at car insurance and the critical issue of road safety in the round. I wholeheartedly thank again the creator of the petition and all the signatories who made that possible for us.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 207616 relating to changes to car insurance.

7.13 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 6 March 2018

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

British Transport Police/ Police Scotland Merger

9.32 am

Douglas Ross: (Moray) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered proposals for the merger of British Transport Police Scottish division with Police Scotland.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. We had a slight wait for you to take the Chair, but I know better than most that the match cannot start without a referee, so it is good to have you in your place. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us time for this debate, as well as all right hon. and hon. Members who supported the application—in particular, the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who joined me in front of that Committee to present our case for the debate. I refer Members to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. My wife is a serving police officer: a police sergeant with Police Scotland.

I want to divide my remarks into three sections: the process from the Smith commission to the vote in the Scottish Parliament, the hon. Gentleman’s question about what is different about the Scottish Government’s guarantee to preserve the police specialism and the functions for the transport police, and the UK Government’s guarantee.

My opposition and the strong opposition from Scottish Conservatives in Westminster and Holyrood must not be considered as disrespecting the Smith commission and devolution settlement that followed. I agree that the functions of the British Transport police in Scotland should be a devolved matter—I just strongly disagree with the approach taken by the SNP Government.

There were and are other options to devolve the powers, but we know that they were never considered by the Scottish Government. Right from the start, the SNP had a blinkered view on its approach—unwilling to listen to expert advice, which opposed its plans, and unwilling to listen to the views of BTP officers, the British Transport Police Federation, rail unions and rail operators. Basically, everyone with considerable knowledge of railway policing warned the SNP against the plans, but they were ignored and the SNP marched on regardless. It only consulted on its preferred option: full integration with Police Scotland.

That was the first of many failures by the Scottish Government, who were unwilling even to consider alternatives put forward by the British Transport police authority as far back as 2015, which suggested giving increased accountability to the Scottish Parliament and giving the Scottish Government greater power over setting policing priorities. That was put forward by the BTPA, and ignored by the SNP Government, who only consulted on their preferred option.

Stuart C. McDonald: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman can tell me whether the UK Government are going to begin to consult on their preferred option, as contained in the manifesto, or whether they are going to look at other options as well.

Douglas Ross: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman is going to speak about the SNP policy that we are discussing today—the debate is about the proposed merger of the British Transport police into Police Scotland out of the extremely successful British Transport police. That is a completely different approach to the one supported by the SNP, which is to rip the transport police. That was the first of many failures by the Scottish Government.

It only consulted on its preferred option: full integration with Police Scotland. The assurances were so weak that even the joint programme board had to finally accept that it was not going to happen and the services could not be protected as they had said they would be.

Stuart C. McDonald: That is not a fair categorisation of what the board said at all. It said progress had been made in some parts of the merger process, but not in others. The hon. Gentleman has not answered my question about what is different about the Scottish Government’s guarantee to preserve the police specialism and the functions for the transport police, and the UK Government’s guarantee.

Douglas Ross: As an example, the Scottish Government say that they would take the 280 or so full-time equivalent BTP officers in Scotland and merge them into Police Scotland with its 17,234 officers. That would not protect them, because if the officers within Police Scotland who wish to have a specialism in railway policing were first on the scene at a non-railway incident, they would be stuck with that incident right the way through. Currently, if Police Scotland are the first on scene at the railways, they can transfer that to a BTP officer when they arrive and vice versa. They could not do that. That is not protecting the current situation and the good work done by BTP officers in Scotland and across the country.

As an example, the Scottish Government have said they would take the 280 or so full-time equivalent BTP officers in Scotland and merge them into Police Scotland with its 17,234 officers. That would not protect them, because if the officers within Police Scotland who wish to have a specialism in railway policing were first on the scene at a non-railway incident, they would be stuck with that incident right the way through. Currently, if Police Scotland are the first on scene at the railways, they can transfer that to a BTP officer when they arrive and vice versa. They could not do that. That is not protecting the current situation and the good work done by BTP officers in Scotland and across the country.
Douglas Ross:

Scotland—or, as the SNP constantly does, does he just want to deflect attention somewhere else, shouting and screaming, “Look over there; don’t look at our failures in Scotland”? The SNP is letting Scotland down. This is yet another example of its centralisation plans, which seem to work in SNP heads and on a bit of paper, but do not deliver for the people of Scotland.

Every proposal was dismissed by the SNP. With the support of the Scottish Greens, the SNP Government forced through their plans. In the face of overwhelming volumes of evidence showing that this was a bad move that would dilute the service currently provided and potentially put rail users at risk, the Bill was passed in the Scottish Parliament. The plans were criticised by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary in Scotland for being entirely political. It also criticised the fact that no business case or due diligence outlining the benefits and costs was or had been prepared by the Scottish Government, saying:

“As the decision to transfer BTP’s functions in Scotland to Police Scotland was a Ministerial decision, no single, detailed and authoritative business case which articulates the benefits, disadvantages or costs of the transfer to Police Scotland was developed.”

That is shameful and unacceptable.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Given that the merger will not in fact be cost-neutral, as originally claimed by the Scottish Government, does my hon. Friend agree that stopping it will not only protect the quality of railway policing in Scotland but save money for hard-pressed Scottish taxpayers, who pay more in Scotland than taxpayers in the rest of the United Kingdom?

Douglas Ross: I absolutely agree. We were also told that the merger of eight regional forces in Scotland into Police Scotland was going not only to deliver a better service but save money. However, the single police force is struggling because of the financial restrictions put on it by the Police Scotland; it is not saving money as the SNP promised it would.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this debate to Westminster Hall for consideration. Does he agree that a workable timeline must be set before allowing a safe transfer that does not compromise public safety? Furthermore, the vital role carried out by the British Transport police must be allowed to continue seamlessly for the benefit of everyone.

Douglas Ross: I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman. Safety for rail users and our officers has to be of paramount importance and I will come on to that in my concluding remarks.

One of the issues that I raised in the Scottish Parliament, when I was on the Justice Committee, was the personal track safety certificate and what it covers. Every BTP officer has that certification. Would all 17,234 Police Scotland officers have that certificate? No, because the cost involved would not allow it. There is a safety risk if officers who have not received the certification go on to the tracks.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman mentioned Police Scotland, and it will be very important for the know-how and full power of the police forces to be combined as quickly and efficiently as possible, to ensure that the benefit of knowledge and experience comes together at the right time.

Douglas Ross: Absolutely. I will come to the timing in a moment, but there is no doubt that, several years after the merger, Police Scotland is still operating under considerable strain because of it; now is not the time to add to the workload of Police Scotland when it is struggling to manage what it has now.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Surely the fact of the delay is proof that Police Scotland is in no fit state to absorb the BTP.

Douglas Ross: Absolutely. We have to remember that the joint programme board is made up of representatives of the Scottish Government, the UK Government and Police Scotland. At their latest meeting in February, they all agreed to recommend a pause to the Scottish Government. None of them could see the implementation of integration being achieved safely by 1 April 2019.

The intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) takes me back to where we are now, which is the pause. We are in a welcome place: the SNP, Police Scotland and the joint programme board all accept that the implementation date of 1 April 2019 will not be met. Gone are the supportive comments from the Police Scotland high command that everything about the proposal is rosy.

I cannot forget the response I received to a question that I put as a member of the Scottish Parliament’s Justice Committee; it came from Assistant Chief Constable Bernie Higgins. Almost exactly a year ago today, on 7 March, I asked him about the problems we had seen with the merger of the eight forces into one and the ongoing challenges faced by Police Scotland. At that point last year, I was asking whether it was the correct time to force ahead with this merger. ACC Higgins, before the Scottish Parliament Justice Committee, replied:

“To be frank, two years is a luxury, based on what we had to do to bring Police Scotland together, so I am confident that the transition would occur”.

Two years as a luxury and confidence from an assistant chief constable of Police Scotland—all now withered on the vine. Deputy Chief Constable Iain Livingstone has made it very clear, in his remarks to the joint programme board and since, that Police Scotland was not ready, that it was not a luxury to have two years to implement the integration and, therefore, that it is correct that we have now paused.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Given all that, does my hon. Friend think it might be the time for Her Majesty’s Government to consider delaying the laying of orders facilitating the merger north of the border?

Douglas Ross: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention and will come on to that towards the end of my speech, when addressing the Minister on what we could do in this Parliament.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. The chair of the British Transport Police Federation said, in the light of the terrorist attacks in Manchester and London,
that the merger should be suspended permanently. The fact that he is talking about terrorism shows the significant difficulties that there might be over safety in the merger.

Douglas Ross: I agree with the points made by the hon. Gentleman. Nigel Goodband and the BTP Federation have been strong advocates for the BTP maintaining its current form in Scotland, with its strong links with Police Scotland and across the rail network. They are strongly opposed, as many of us in this Chamber and indeed in Holyrood are, to the SNP’s plans for integration.

I have just quoted ACC Bernie Higgins from almost a year ago to the day saying that two years was a luxury. Even more recently, however, SNP politicians have been saying, “Everything is fine. Don’t worry about this. We’ll keep on moving.” On 24 January 2018 in the Scottish Parliament, my colleagues in the Scottish Conservatives, led by our justice spokesperson Liam Kerr, moved a motion calling for a pause, but every single SNP Member voted against that motion.

Not only did the SNP MSPs vote against, but they gave us some great quotes. Rona Mackay said:

“What more proof do the Conservatives need that the merger has been planned meticulously to ensure a smooth transition in 2019?”

She continued:

“It would be preposterous to pause the process while negotiations are on-going, so I urge the Conservatives to stop trying to derail the merger, which will make Scotland a safer and more secure place in which to live and travel.”

Her colleague, Fulton MacGregor, said that “plans are going as expected and there should be no issue with integration going ahead on 1 April next year.”

Deputy SNP leadership candidate James Dornan said:

“The terms and conditions have been worked on regularly and I am pretty sure that, when they get to the merger, everybody will be happy.”—[Scottish Parliament Official Report, 24 January 2018; c. 54-64.]

It turns out no one is happy, because we will not achieve the merger on the timescale put forward by the SNP Government. They were wholly unprepared for the problems faced by a number of elements in the joint programme board, yet they were optimistic that everything would be fine, it could all be sorted out and, finally, they could get rid of the “British” from the name “British Transport police” operating in Scotland.

I want to look at a number of other aspects. We have had many useful briefings for this debate, and in particular I welcome the contribution of the British Transport Police Federation. A recently published study by Dr Kath Murray and Dr Colin Atkinson looked at the British Transport police merger in Scotland. It was published just before the announcement of a pause, but it included many useful pieces of information. For example, 83% of British Transport police officers in Scotland responded to the study to say that they were either very unsupportive or quite unsupportive of the merger plans—83% of our BTP officers in Scotland; that tells a story.

The study was also useful for some of the quotes of the respondents, which I want to read out. Speaking about the BTP Scotland merger, one officer said:

“It is being destroyed for political reasons. I am happy with my job and the way I am treated. It is an infuriating turn of events.

It is this political motivation which has angered officers most rather than any other issue.”

Another said:

“I find it incredible that a merger of this size has been allowed to progress without a formal business case outlining the benefits and risks.”

One final quote is:

“The communication throughout has been woefully lacking. Two years of talks; I am unsure what, if anything, has actually taken place.

The vacuum of information is filled with rumour and hyperbole which tends to affect morale.”

Those are just three of the comments made by officers who contributed to that study, but they are reiterated time and again by the British Transport Police Federation, which is standing up for its officers and opposing the merger.

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that survey, which will of course have to be addressed, but one of the key reasons behind those levels of opposition was, in essence, a sense of loyalty to the British Transport police as it stands. Does he not agree that the proposals in his party’s manifesto would receive a similar response if there was a survey on those as well?

Douglas Ross: I am unsure whether I have given way two, three or four times to the hon. Gentleman, yet he has still not mentioned his own party’s plans, which we are debating today—the SNP plans to merge the British Transport police in Scotland into Police Scotland. He only wants to ask about the Conservative plans; perhaps he should propose a debate on them to the Backbench Business Committee. I would gladly join him in Westminster Hall to debate those proposals, but today we are debating his party’s plans—dangerous plans for merging British Transport police into Police Scotland. We should focus our remarks on how damaging those plans are to police officers in Scotland, rail users in Scotland and indeed the operators.

The lack of a financial case has been highlighted a number of times. When I was on the Justice Committee, we concluded that the supporting financial memorandum did not provide enough detail on the expected cost of integration or on who should pay. We said at the time that that was unacceptable, and again the Scottish Government did not respond with the information required.

Another huge issue for the federation and officers was terms and conditions: the so-called triple lock that was promised by Michael Matheson as Justice Secretary and Humza Yousaf as Transport Secretary. There is a real vacuum on information available to our officers, who potentially were just 13 months from the merger—from leaving the force that they joined and were proud to serve in, to be merged into Police Scotland—yet still had no concrete detail on pay and conditions and on terms and conditions. Again, they have rightly felt let down by the Scottish Government in their negotiations.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On jobs, pay, conditions, and terms and conditions, it was actually guaranteed that there would be no jobs lost; terms and conditions were maintained, and there will be no pension issues arising from either retired, deferred or current British Transport police officers transferred across.
Douglas Ross: I thank the hon. Gentleman for mentioning pensions, because that is exactly what I was about to come on to. In the Public Gallery, we have members from the National Association for Retired British Transport Police Officers. What consultation did they have with the Scottish Government or the joint programme board? Zero. Retired officers, who will be impacted, were not consulted, included or even recognised by the Scottish Government in the merger proposals. Those officers have serious concerns, which include that they understood that the proposal was for Scottish members to be moved from the main funds to a newly segregated Scottish fund. That is likely to amount to around 250 serving officers, and probably about 200 retired officers, affected, without the courtesy of being informed of how many members in Scotland would come under the proposal. That will create almost immediately a closed fund: at one end, the number of serving officers will reduce each year due to retirements; at the other, retired officers will stop taking their pensions. Very quickly, there will be no new money coming in.

I would be grateful if SNP Members responded to the many concerns from the National Association for Retired British Transport Police Officers on that point, because they have never been answered by the Scottish Government through the joint programme board or at any opportunity in the Scottish Parliament. Such uncertainty is unacceptable for men and women who have served this country with great dignity and service, but are being left in the lurch by the SNP.

There are some positive developments. I said at the beginning that I welcome the fact that the SNP Government have paused these plans. We called for that in January; the joint programme board agreed it in February, and the SNP Government have finally listened. The Deputy Chief Constable designate of Police Scotland, Iain Livingstone, welcomed the delay and made no commitment at the most recent Scottish police authority board. He said that “we will be reassessing in the coming months what the challenges and options are, and will then report back to Government”.

I took that as a very welcome signal from the top of Police Scotland that it is not simply pausing, but looking at all other options.

It is also extremely welcome that the British Transport police integration will be reviewed by Audit Scotland as part of its annual review. Proper scrutiny of the plans has been missing throughout this process, to judge how things were progressing as we went along. That intervention by Audit Scotland is welcome, but we must ensure that any progress, or lack of it, is highlighted at the correct times.

I am grateful that we have the UK Minister here; I think the hon. Member for East Lothian will agree that much of the concern from the SNP at the Backbench Business Committee was, “This has nothing to do with Westminster; you devolved these powers in 2016.” The SNP Member on the Backbench Business Committee told us that we should not debate it here. When I raised the issue in business questions or with the Prime Minister, SNP Members in the House of Commons shouted me down because they did not want it discussed in Westminster. But it is right that this issue is discussed in Westminster, because, as was said in an intervention, the UK Government still have to lay the orders that are scheduled for this autumn. I hope the Minister confirms that those orders will be paused, because of the pause in Scotland.

We do not devolve and forget. It is right that elected Members from Scotland in this place continue to look at the merger of British Transport police into Police Scotland. It is also right that peers in the other place tabled a motion of regret on this very point. Indeed, as I have said a number of times, this issue has been debated as recently as January in the Scottish Parliament. Both Parliaments are right to raise it and to discuss and debate it.

Ian Murray: There is a role for this Parliament, and not only for the reasons that the hon. Gentleman stated, as there will be a consequence for the British Transport police, too, when the Scottish section is taken away. There are no railway stations on the Scottish border. Therefore, transport police from England will have to travel beyond Carlisle and beyond Berwick, through the Scottish border, when that is not their responsibility.

Douglas Ross: Absolutely. That was highlighted a number of times when the issue was debated in the Scottish Parliament, and it has been included in almost every briefing that we have received. If we end up with the SNP proposal and the status quo here in the rest of the UK, potentially two different forces will be investigating crimes on the same line. Not only is that confusing to rail users and consumers, but it will lead to duplication and misunderstanding, which will lead to a poorer service for Scottish rail users. We should not accept that.

Let us not just pause this process; let us restart it. Let us go back and look at all the options, to ensure that everyone is considered and every option listened to. When I raised the issue at Prime Minister’s questions, she made it clear that she did not believe that this Government should devolve and forget. She also made it clear that passenger safety must come first in any decision making. That has not happened so far, which is why the pause is welcome and why we must look again from the beginning, to ensure the best outcome for BTP officers both current and retired, for rail operators and for everyone who uses our rail services in Scotland and across the UK.

I will take my final words from the study by Dr Kath Murray and Dr Colin Atkinson, which sums up the issue better than anything else. An officer who looked at the plans said:

“It quickly became very clear that dissolving BTP Scotland as opposed to devolving BTP Scotland was going to take place... With no career future in sight, I decided to leave, but long service, conscience and pride in what we have achieved so far means I will stay until the last day. Leaving the best crime and justice legacy of BTP Scotland is important to me. My name will be on it at handover.”

I hope that that officer will continue to serve BTP in Scotland, because with this pause he can continue longer in the force he joined, the force he enjoyed working with and the force in which he took great pride in protecting the people of Scotland and the UK on our railways.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 11 o’clock. As there are five Members who wish to speak, I will impose a five-minute limit on speeches. That allows some leeway for interventions,
but if there are too many, I am afraid that the last speakers will not be allowed the full five minutes. I call Ian Murray.

9.59 am

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): As always, it is a great pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I do not want to echo all the remarks made by the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), whom I congratulate, along with my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), on initiating the debate.

We are having this debate at a crucial point in the life cycle of the British Transport police and this issue, and I am delighted that it has been brought forward.

Let me say at the outset that all five parties that sat around the Smith commission table agreed that the Scottish section of the British Transport police should be devolved. No one suggests that it should not be; the questions are how it will be devolved to the Scottish Parliament, how it will subsequently be operated, and what that will achieve not only in Scotland but across the United Kingdom. Those are significant issues for everyone involved.

The issue really is safety. We know that the merger is driven by ideology—everything is driven by ideology for the Scottish National party—but safety is the issue.

Stuart C. McDonald: It is important to say that the merger is not driven by ideology. What does the hon. Gentleman think of the recent review of terror attacks in London by his colleague, Lord Harris, who aired the possibility that the London underground functions of the British Transport police should be considered for merger with the Metropolitan Police Service? Other Governments are thinking about these things, too.

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman has just highlighted that, in terms of terrorism, the Metropolitan police do not say that the British Transport police should be merged in the same way that is suggested in Scotland. I am glad we are having a discussion about terrorism. As I mentioned in an intervention, the BTP chair said that, in the light of terror attacks, any reorganisation of the British Transport police should be paused or halted permanently, on the basis that terrorism and the safety of the people of this country are the single biggest issue that the police service and security services deal with. Everyone should pause and reflect on why the Scottish Government created a body to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish

Ian Murray: The pension fund is a huge issue. No one has any confidence that the integration would be done properly, because the creation of Police Scotland was botched. I will not go into the VAT issue, but the SNP created a problem by ensuring that Police Scotland was no longer able to apply for section 33 VAT exemption. They said that it did not matter and blamed the UK Government for removing Police Scotland from the exemption. The UK Government then said that they would exempt circumstances. Great damage is being done to Police Scotland because of the botched merger of all the police forces to create that body, not because of individual officers, who do as much as they possibly can on the ground with the slim pickings of resources they are given.

To see how bad this integration would be, it is worth thinking about one of the basic grassroots issues—trains. They were discussed at great length on a cross-party basis when Lord Foulkes of Cumnock brought a debate on this subject to the House of Lords. There is no station on the border, on either the west coast or the east coast. In fact, no one could get a train into Scotland for four days last week. The last stations in England and the first out of Scotland on the UK main lines are Carlisle on the west coast and Berwick on the east coast.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Many constituents got in touch with me last week who had been stranded in Carlisle and relied on the help of the British Transport police to make arrangements to get home safely. Surely that would be disrupted if this merger happened and the single policing structure on the west coast main line were dislocated.

Ian Murray: The service would be disrupted, and it would be an incredible waste of resources. If I may use these crude terms, we would need either English officers to stay on trains from Carlisle to Glasgow or from Berwick to Edinburgh, or—vice versa—Scottish officers to stay on trains going south. There will have to be some kind of agreement. None of that has been taken into account. That is why we welcome the pause in the integration and the fact that all these issues will have to be looked at.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Murray: I will not, if the hon. Gentleman doesn’t mind, because of the time. Other people want to speak.

Many people have asked for a commissioning arrangement to be set up that would allow the Scottish Government to commission BTP services and the chief constable to be directly accountable to the Scottish Parliament—and perhaps even the UK Parliament—for the operation of the Scottish side of BTP. That arrangement would be based on a framework that everyone was happy with. The shadow Justice Secretary in Scotland, Daniel Johnson MSP, called for a pause, and I am delighted that one has been put in place. I hope that the Minister listens seriously to what the people who actually police our safety, our borders and our transport system say about how such a commissioning arrangement may work in the longer term.

The pension fund is a huge issue. No one has any confidence that the integration would be done properly, because the creation of Police Scotland was botched. I will not go into the VAT issue, but the SNP created a problem by ensuring that Police Scotland was no longer able to apply for section 33 VAT exemption. They said that it did not matter and blamed the UK Government for removing Police Scotland from the exemption. The UK Government then said that they would exempt
Police Scotland again, and the SNP claimed victory and blamed the UK Government for its removal in the first place.

I use that example not to make a political point but to say that it is little wonder that police forces, police officers and people who work in the sector have no confidence that the integration can be done properly. The pension fund is a big issue. It is a small fund, and I understand from one of the pensioners in it that it is in surplus. Integrating it or taking away the safety net of the wider British Transport police pension fund would certainly be detrimental to current pensioners and future pensioners. I hope that the Minister will look very seriously at working with his Scottish counterparts to ensure that any integration is done properly and will look at the commissioning proposals.

10.6 am

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) for securing this important debate.

Members will be aware that recommendation 67 of Lord Smith of Kelvin’s report on Scottish devolution, which was published in November 2014, provides:

“The functions of the British Transport Police in Scotland will be a devolved matter.”

Furthermore, sections 45 and 46 of the Scotland Act 2016 empower the Scottish Parliament to legislate for the policing of Scotland’s railways and provide for the Scottish Government to be consulted on appointments of senior officers to the British Transport police. That said, I contend, as I am sure would many others, that it is not in the travelling public’s interest to apply those powers and that this is not the appropriate time to bring together the British Transport police and Police Scotland. However, I note and welcome the Scottish Government’s very good decision to put on hold indefinitely their plans to absorb the Scottish division of the British Transport police into Police Scotland. Why would they seek at this moment in time to amalgamate the British Transport police—a specialist, standalone, effective force that apparently operates seamlessly with Police Scotland—into Police Scotland, a force that in recent years, together with the Scottish police authority, has been under increasing public criticism and scrutiny?

I must make it clear that the vast majority of Police Scotland’s frontline officers are to be commended for continuing to serve to the best of their abilities in difficult times, when consistency of high-level leadership may be perceived to be lacking and maintaining staff morale is immensely challenging.

In 2017, the British Transport police set a core budget of around £297 million for policing Great Britain’s railways and kept its price promise to keep budget increases below the retail prices index. It has maintained policing costs at the same level as last year. I doubt that the same may be said for Police Scotland since its inception. The chief constable of the British Transport police reports that more than 7,000 rail passengers and rail staff responded to a public consultation, and 85%—a significant number—of rail passengers were positive about the work BTP was doing at their local station. The satisfaction rating and feedback were apparently similar among the rail staff who responded.

As I understand it, the Scottish Government’s vision, although it is on hold, is for the British Transport police to become a specialist railway policing unit within Police Scotland. However, that unit would be funded differently from the remainder of Police Scotland. How can we be sure that the train operating companies, freight companies, Network Rail and London Underground, which currently provide funding, would continue to do so for a force that was incorporated within another based solely in Scotland? If we cannot be sure of that, might the Scottish taxpayers yet again be burdened with extra financial costs?

Concerns were expressed by the British Transport police authority, who identified a number of potential operational risks associated with the integration, including, in particular, and as mentioned by hon. Members, cross-border issues and staff morale, and the serious issue of pensions. The Rail Delivery Group identified possible additional expenses and a dilution of accountability associated with the Scottish Government’s proposal.

I, for one, am not convinced that those reasonably held concerns have been properly addressed to everyone’s satisfaction to ensure that we achieve British Transport police’s vision of working with industry partners and stakeholders to deliver a safe, secure, reliable and expanding transport system. Will it be maintained at its present, effective level should a merger take place at some time in the near future? I do not think the British Transport police’s effectiveness would be preserved if the merger took place.

10.10 am

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on bringing the debate to the Chamber. This is clearly an issue that he feels passionately about—and quite right, too.

I start by paying tribute to the officers and staff of the British Transport police for their dedicated service and hard work in making safe the journeys of millions of passengers every day—not just on the rail network, but on services such as the London underground, docklands light railway, Emirates air line, Glasgow subway and others.

The officers of the British Transport police have been involved in some of the most difficult and dangerous incidents and policing operations in living memory, including the 1987 King’s Cross underground fire; dealing with numerous IRA bomb threats; rail crashes at Southall, Paddington, Hatfield, Potters Bar and Selby; and the response to the 7/7 terror attacks on underground trains near Edgware Road, King’s Cross and Aldgate. Whatever our views are on the future structure of transport policing, we are all united in offering our thanks to those officers and staff.

Although the British Transport police draws its authority from an Act of Parliament from 2003, it can trace its history back to 1830, allowing it to claim to be one of the world’s oldest police forces. Its history is also one of numerous reinventions and reorganisations to meet the challenges of the times. In the same way, each of the Governments of the UK are called on to make sure transport policing is prepared for current and future challenges. These are challenging times—or, as the British Transport police authority’s 2013 plan put it,
“a period that will require unprecedented change in railway policing” to provide exceptional service quality at reduced cost.

Different proposals have come forward. As we have heard, in last year’s elections Conservative MPs across the UK stood on a manifesto that included the pledge:

“We will create a national infrastructure police force, bringing together the Civil Nuclear Constabulary, the Ministry of Defence Police and the British Transport Police to improve the protection of critical infrastructure such as nuclear sites, railways and the strategic road network.”

In London, Mayor Sadiq Khan commissioned a review by the Labour peer Lord Harris of Haringey into London’s ability to deal with a terrorist attack. Noting that the Home Office is currently exploring options for merging certain national policing functions, his lordship reported that “if such changes are being considered, it is important that the benefits of fully integrating the MPS and the underground policing functions of the BTP are considered at the same time.”

The outgoing Met Police Commissioner said there was a “good argument” for a merger, because the current set-up is “confusing” and such a merger could achieve “improved operational effectiveness” in responding to terror attacks.

Douglas Ross: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify that the examples he has cited from other parties in the UK are quite different from the SNP’s proposal for Scotland—to merge a specialist force into Police Scotland, which itself is a relatively new body still struggling with its own merger of the eight regional forces into one?

Stuart C. McDonald: Of course there are differences between the various merger plans, but a variety of different institutions and Governments in the United Kingdom are having to make changes to how transport policing works. Indeed, the possibility flagged up in Lord Harris’s report is of integrating the specialist British Transport police on the underground into the more general Metropolitan Police Service.

In Scotland, the Scottish Government have decided that policing and public safety are best served by merging the recently devolved British Transport police into Police Scotland. That decision was debated in great detail in the Scottish Parliament, including by the hon. Member for Moray, but ultimately the Scottish Parliament backed that decision, passing the Railway Policing (Scotland) Act 2017, which is the first step in making that happen.

Without raking over old coals again, I do think that was the correct decision. Through the merger, the assets, resources and range of skills of the second-largest police force in the United Kingdom will be deployed routinely, rather than on request, on rail transport policing, just as for our roads, seaports, airports and border policing. That, together with clear assurances from both the Scottish Government and Police Scotland that specialist railway policing functions and the skill set of our transport police will be preserved after integration means that the merger’s objective is to not just maintain but enhance safety and security standards on railways in Scotland.

All those arguments are mirrored in Lord Harris’s report to Mayor Khan. Given the developments at the Home Office and the Conservative Government’s proposals, without the Scottish Government’s decision we might have ended up being the only part of the United Kingdom with a stand-alone transport police service, which would not have made much sense. It is not clear whether Conservative Members are arguing for that today.

Rather than reopen that argument, our task is to ensure that the considerable challenges of the merger are overcome, and that the inevitable and legitimate concerns and uncertainty for staff are addressed as thoroughly as possible. That is why a joint programme board was established. It was always the case that the timetable for the merger could change as progress was reviewed. While progress has been made in some areas, the board has recommended that the merger target date be extended beyond April 2019. That is regrettable, but it is right that the timescale is changed rather than the merger attempted at an impossible pace.

Meanwhile, Police Scotland has provided assurances that the right of any BTP member transferred to police the railway environment until they retire will be respected. There have been detailed discussions between the Scottish Government, the British Transport Police Federation and the Transport Salaried Staffs Association, and a guarantee has been pledged that secures jobs, pay and pensions through the course of integration.

Despite the picture that has been painted, there has been constructive engagement among railway operators, the Scottish Police Authority, Police Scotland and the Government. Unlike at present, a railway policing management forum is to be placed on a statutory footing to ensure rail operator engagement and accountability, and tasked with reaching agreement on the service, performance and costs of railway policing in Scotland. There has been positive engagement with the Transport Department at Westminster, where statutory instruments will be required.

I acknowledge that this has been and will be a challenging period for the British Transport police and current and retired staff. However, I believe this ultimately to be the best option for transport policing in Scotland—in fact, it is almost the only option. I trust that all parties involved will continue to work to make the transition as smooth as it can be.

10.17 am

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on securing this debate, which it was a pleasure to co-sponsor. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for providing time for it. It is, as always, an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I thank the Scottish Government, who have eventually arrived at the same conclusion as almost everyone else in Scotland: there is a need for a pause and to think through full-scale integration. Rather than dwell on what took so long, I hope that we can face the challenges and complexities of merging these diverse organisations and look at it again, for the sake of passenger safety, on the advice of experts including the federation, trade unions, Police Scotland employees, me and the Labour party. We need to kill the concept of a future full-scale merger.

The debate has been carelessly framed by some as a divide between those who want to weaken the current devolution settlement and those who want to strengthen it. The Smith commission was clear. It said, among other things on transport, that “the functions of the British Transport Police in Scotland will be a devolved matter.”
Stuart C. McDonald: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Whitfield: I will not, because the hon. Gentleman has made a lot of interventions and had his chance to make a speech.

I hold no objections to the devolution of functions from the British Transport police to Police Scotland. In fact, the Scotland Act provides good scope for the transferral of such policing powers; yet, contrary to popular belief, a full merger under the devolution powers was not the only option.

The Smith commission preceded the publication of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee's report on the matter. The Committee produced a number of options, which offered a range of answers. Options 1 and 2 looked first to provide an administrative and legislative settlement that would provide political accountability to Holyrood and Police Scotland. Those options, which were ignored by the Scottish Government, would as a preliminary settlement still have carried the recommendations brought forward by the Smith commission. We would still be able to devolve the service without putting passenger safety at risk and casting the uncertainty over pensions and jobs that we have heard about today.

Option 3 was full-blown integration: the most complex route to answer the devolution statement. By opting for a full merger, the Scottish Government put dogma before the people and services that they should serve. We have heard—this is an example of an alternative administrative legislative settlement—that Transport for London funds more than 2,500 police officers across the Metropolitan police, British Transport police, and the City of London police. Those police tackle crime and antisocial behaviour, and they make people feel safer when travelling in London. British Transport police have responsibility for the tube, the DLR and other areas, and through their neighbourhood policy they cater for the particular needs of communities near the stations they serve.

We have considered the financial demands that the Police Scotland merger has created, the stress faced by officers who serve on the street, and the managerial integration that is proving so very challenging. We have heard discussions about terrorism: the British Transport police have a terrorist specialism based in London, as does the unit that specialises in murder on the transport network. That is because, unfortunately, that is the geographical area where such things occur the most, so the specialist teams are where they need to be.

Hopefully, this debate will highlight the financial impact of the merger and the genuine questions that Police Scotland and BTP employees have about pay and conditions. It is better late than never, and I am relieved that those concerns have put any merger on hold. However, the past refusal of the Scottish Government to consider alternative forms to devolution fails to rectify the issues under discussion.

The Scottish Government have questions to answer, but I also wish to pose three questions to the Minister. When does the Secretary of State plan to lay orders to transfer power under the Scotland Act? Has the Minister received any acknowledgement of discussions between Police Scotland and train operators to establish a railway policy agreement? What discussions have the Government held with their counterparts north of the border about the review of British Transport police integration by Audit Scotland? There are proposals, including the commissioning model, that are supported by BTP, rail users and other interested parties. Such solutions will deliver an transparent and accountable BTP for Scotland, and a fair, consensual devolution settlement that I hope all parties will get behind.

10.22 am

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op):
Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for your efficient chairmanship of this debate. I commend the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) for securing it.

Last week we debated Scottish city deals, which examined one side of the devolution equation. This debate examines the other side of that equation, and looks at how effective the devolution process has been over the past 20 years. We are seeing the emergence of the Scottish Government as a Leviathan—an unwelcome Leviathan in many ways. The devolution process was never designed to be like this; it was designed to create institutions to facilitate collaboration and strong partnerships at all levels of government, including local government and with the UK Government. Devolution should never be considered an annexation of power; it should be about building strong partnerships that facilitate efficient collaboration. We need to rediscover that as part of the devolution settlement.

I wish to reflect on the process through which the Smith commission discussed the devolution of the British Transport police to the Scottish Government, and the spirit in which that was done. No one disagrees with the idea of devolution, but the manner in which the Scottish Government have subsequently managed it has been less than satisfactory. The Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee presented three options for railway policing following the publication of the Smith commission's report and the passage of the Scotland Act. Instead of consulting on which of those three would be the most effective, the Scottish Government instead railroaded through one simple option, with little room for stakeholders to affect the outcome. What sort of democratic devolved discussion and collaborative process is that?

Option 1 looked at administrative measures, including ways to increase alignment with Police Scotland initiatives and BTP's accountability to Scottish institutions. It examined a new role for the Scottish Police Authority in policing following the publication of the Smith commission's report and the passage of the Scotland Act. Instead of consulting on which of those three would be the most effective, the Scottish Government instead railroaded through one simple option, with little room for stakeholders to affect the outcome. What sort of democratic devolved discussion and collaborative process is that?

Option 2 considered legislative and administrative measures, including clarifying in statute arrangements through which the Scottish Government may give direction to the British Transport police authority. Under that option, the BTPA would retain responsibilities for pensions, employment contracts, and defraying the costs of policing to the rail industry. Planning and strategy setting for railway policing in Scotland would be reviewed to enable greater involvement by the Scottish Police Authority.

Both options considered new branding for the BTP in Scotland, but again that was disregarded without any consultation.

The only option presented as a meaningful way forward was full integration, which was also deemed the most complex route. There was, however, no justification for
it on that basis, so why were the other options disregarded out of hand? It is no surprise that the process has been halted, because its basis was clearly unsound from the beginning. That is why the chief inspector of constabulary in Scotland stated:

“The scope and scale of the challenges and complexity of the transfer should not be underestimated. It is not a merger of one complete organisation with another, but the partial extraction of a function from one organisation and its integration into another organisation.”

There is also a problem with staffing, morale, and the skills that are vital to sustaining the British Transport police across the United Kingdom. The Scottish Government seek to merge the BTP with Police Scotland, but they opposed the first two options on the grounds that they would not deliver a single command structure for policing in Scotland.

However, a single command structure is not necessarily desirable, because staff of the British Transport police want to maintain their integrity and their skills and specialisms. If they are removed from that structure and the only way to advance in the organisation is to move out of the rail division and into another part of Police Scotland, the dilution of the skills base will be self-evident. Why is that desirable? It is not, which is why it is necessary and key to maintain the discrete structure of the British Transport police in Scotland through other measures. Such dilution of the skills base is not desirable for staff or for efficient devolution.

For devolution to be a true success, we must examine both sides of the equation and ensure that local government, structures and institutions in Scotland are protected from the encroachment of Edinburgh. We must ensure effective collaboration among the Scottish Government, the UK Government and UK institutions to enable the most efficient management of those services in Scotland.

Stuart C. McDonald: Why would it be more difficult to retain a transport police function within a broader Police Scotland than to retain a firearms specialism, for example?

Mr Sweeney: Because opportunities for advancement within the British Transport police transcend the border — people can move between different regional divisions and they can learn different skills and benefit from training across the UK. It is desirable to maintain such opportunities, and on that basis the British Transport police structure in Scotland should be revisited. We should reconsider those three options and discuss them openly and with good intentions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. We now come to the Front-Bench speakers, and the guideline limit is 10 minutes each. To help them, I will ask the clock to show 10 minutes per speech.

10.27 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I thank you for your guidance. I congratulate the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on securing this debate. He raised important issues, and I will try to address some of them in my speech. Parts of his contribution felt a bit like Saturday when the football was happening in front of me but I was not necessarily enjoying what I was seeing.

For me, the low point is the suggestion that this change is driven by a desire to get rid of the word “British” from British Transport police, as that clearly is not a credible argument. The hon. Member for Moray also accused my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) of shouting and screaming, but all he was doing was trying to make valid interventions. The hon. Gentleman did make important points, however, and I will come on to them.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) confirmed that five parties in the Smith commission agreed on the devolution of the Scottish division of British Transport police, and we must understand that devolution is about handing powers to the Scottish Parliament, and about that Parliament making decisions using those powers. That is where the thrust of the debate should be. The hon. Gentleman also said that there was no train station right on the border, and the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) intervened and said that passengers were stranded at Carlisle last week, and if it had not been for the British Transport police helping them to go up the road, they might have struggled. However, I fail to see how that will change in a new set-up. The police will always do their best to help passengers, constituents and members of the public, and that will not change. To suggest that it will is to cloud the issue.

The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) mentioned the overall budget, but he failed to say that Scotland currently gets 5% of the BTP budget. Given that it has more than 11% of the rail network, that suggests a budget deficit. Perhaps that can be looked at in future, with the possible merger with Police Scotland.

Ian Murray: I do not think my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) and I were suggesting that customer service at Carlisle would be damaged by any of these changes to British Transport police, but if there is an incident on a train between Carlisle and Glasgow, who deals with it?

Alan Brown: Does that mean someone on the train, or someone in a call centre?

Martin Whitfield: Who deals with it from the British Transport police perspective?

Alan Brown: Obviously, I am not involved in the day-to-day workings, but it would depend where the incident was reported to. It is clear that working practices could be put in place, to be agreed between companies, about who to speak to about an incident and who would take charge.

Stuart C. McDonald: That sort of example would be no more challenging with respect to cross-border rail police than would an incident on the roads, for example. Immigration officers also surely have to cross borders regularly, and powers are created to allow people to operate across borders and overcome such difficulties.
Alan Brown: The hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) has said he welcomes the pause in the process, but in fact he considers it as an opportunity to kill the policy off outright. He said that the British Transport police centre of excellence on terrorism was in London because London was more prone to terrorist attacks, but I do not see why that means that the Scottish division should not be incorporated into Police Scotland. There is still clear cross-border co-operation on such matters.

Martin Whitfield: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Alan Brown: I cannot just now. The hon. Member for Glasgow North East spoke of an automatic dilution of skills. That is not a logical conclusion. If a railway division is retained in the new set-up, there should not be a dilution of skills. In fact, it is a way to enhance skills and opportunities within Police Scotland.

Mr Sweeney: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Alan Brown: No; I will see if I have time near the end of my speech.

We are debating an important matter, which the Scottish Government are trying to deal with. It is clear that there are concerns within the Scottish division of the British Transport police about the proposals, and the claim that there are concerns among staff members cannot be refuted. We have to take the concerns seriously, given that we are talking about valued police officers who provide vital services, keeping us safe. Staff morale and welfare in relation to stress or concerns is of utmost priority. I think that that is what led to the current pause. However, even when those factors are taken into account, they do not justify the complete policy U-turn that most Members of other parties have called for.

Douglas Ross: To take the question away from what Opposition parties say, Deputy Chief Constable Livingstone said at the last Scottish police authority board meeting that we should look at options, not only at the merger that has been paused. If the hon. Gentleman does not agree with Opposition politicians, does he agree with Deputy Chief Constable Livingstone?

Alan Brown: He obviously feeds into the joint programme board that will be developed; but it depends what he means by “options”. It could be timescales and how the integration goes ahead.

The Smith commission recommended the devolution of the transport police. The SNP Government submission at that point made it clear that their planned governance mechanism would be to incorporate the British Transport police division into Police Scotland. No opposition party responded to the consultation on British Transport police integration, so I have to ask what their concerns were previously. In reality, following the devolution of the British Transport police, the Scottish Parliament approved the integration proposals in June 2017. The majority of the Justice Committee endorsed the proposals; as I said, it was the Scottish Parliament that agreed to them, not simply the SNP Government. The SNP does not have a majority at Holyrood.
Police Scotland and other police forces now—particularly with counter-terrorism. If police from different police forces work on areas of that kind on a cross-border basis now, surely that can continue in the new set-up.

Police Scotland was mentioned in passing, and I should point out that it is being protected, budget-wise, in real terms. It has 1,000 more officers than in 2007. The fantastic work that its officers do needs greater political support, not to be drowned out by high-level politicking. Police Scotland performs well in its day-to-day fight against crime, which is at an all-time low in Scotland but is rising in England and Wales. The current D division employees of the British Transport police do a fantastic job, and I am confident that integration can be made to work well, and will prove the correct model in the future.

10.38 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, in what has been a strong debate on the Railway Policing (Scotland) Act 2017, which permits the merger of the British Transport police Scottish division with Police Scotland, although it does not make it obligatory. Clearly there are many other models, as we heard from the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), who opened the debate so well, and from my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who explained the importance of the Smith commission and the devolution settlement in moving forward. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) articulated incredibly well, that meant not annexation but collaboration. We should move forward in that way, and the debate is timely in the light of the announcement of 20 February on the pause in the process.

It is vital in policing that policy decisions are backed by strong evidence. Sadly, I have heard more ideology from the Scottish National party today. As to SNP Members saying that they are confident there will be no looking back, confidence is not enough. We need strong evidence, because this is a matter of public safety. The transport network faces challenging issues today. When we hear that 83% of police oppose the measures, we need to understand why there is a lack of confidence in what the SNP has put forward.

We cannot take away some of the other challenges that are being brought to bear, particularly the governance and capacity issues within Police Scotland—not that they cannot be resolved in the future, but they certainly exist at this time. We have heard about the challenges over pensions, terms and conditions, and cross-border policing, which my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) has been pursuing through written questions and raised again today.

Alan Brown: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Gentleman has just had 10 minutes, and I need to make progress.

We also need to understand that more work should have been done on the three options that were presented, because clearly only one option was looked at. I believe the Scottish Government had a responsibility to dive deeper into each of those options from the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee to find the right model in moving forward, and that that would have led to the safest option. We need to ensure that those options are now revisited and reviewed, to make sure proper scoping work is carried out and to understand the impact of that. If option 1, talking about the greater alignment of institutions, is taken, it might be recognised that that is as far as it needs to go to ensure complete public safety across the railway. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian has highlighted, the commissioning model of Transport for London, working in an integrated, collaborative way, is another option, and there might be a hybrid model that comes forward once we have been able to review the situation as it is. We need to go back and review those options.

We also need to understand how complex the situation is, not least because we are negotiating across a range of bodies. We have to go back to the fragmented railway system as it is, with the different franchise operators servicing the Scottish railways. Labour wants to see a much more integrated, nationalised railway, which would certainly make things far simpler, but it is important that we look at these issues in the time we are in.

We must think about the specific issues that the transport police are involved in. Of course, that is not isolated from community policing. In my York Central constituency, the transport police have worked closely with the police in dealing with antisocial behaviour and tackling alcohol consumption on trains, making my city safer. That collaboration is vital, but the key is collaboration and working together. It is not changing systems to suit a particular narrative, which, I am afraid, is what this debate has steered into. We also need to be mindful of the integration of the work of the British Transport police with, for instance, that of the guards. We have seen assaults rising quite sharply on our rail network, which is why Labour is committed to ensuring that we have guards on our trains to make the public safe. It is an integrated role.

There are specific roles: dealing with missing and vulnerable children is a big issue for the transport police, as is dealing with public safety at railway stations. Mental health challenges are a big issue that the police have to address at stations, including the specifics of trying to engage with the public to reduce the risk of suicide and harm. One hon. Member raised in the debate the issue of being able to access the rail line, because of vulnerable people finding their way on to railway lines, or trespass. There are specific tasks with specific training that are done by the British Transport police. If we fragment the service, where is that specialist training going to come from without the years and years of expertise built up in providing that access?

Alan Brown: Will the hon. Lady explain why, if a specialist police division is retained within Police Scotland, suitable training on suicide prevention and the other measures she mentions cannot be provided? That issue probably cuts across Police Scotland and other measures that other officers have to take.

Rachael Maskell: I struggle again with the SNP’s intervention, because there are specific issues about not just people at risk at stations, but people finding their way on to the rail network itself and how that is addressed. We have heard about the training that is needed on access to the track and keeping the public safe.
Martin Whitfield: Is it not correct to say that, for example, when we share the east coast main line, which runs north and south, the integration has to be north and south? Events that happen in York or Newcastle have knock-on effects both in Scotland and down in London on that one railway line.

Rachael Maskell: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. That point came out strongly in one of the submissions to the consultation, talking about things such as the management of football fans and ensuring that that is done through co-ordination between Scotland and England. It is important that we see that integration continue.

Coming back to issues of expertise, the British Transport Police Federation chairman, Nigel Goodband, said:

"Given the recent terrorist attacks in Manchester and London, and the ongoing and significant threat from terrorism, I am writing to you as a matter of urgency to implore you to suspend the Railway Policing (Scotland) Bill."

Here we have somebody in a lead position of expertise imploring the Scottish Government to put this proposal, as it is presented today, on ice, who is backed by the trade unions, the police and Labour.

We need to ensure greater alignment and good collaboration—I think everybody in this debate would agree with that—but we must remember that policing is needed across borders too. Rail does not respect borders, and neither does crime. If this is about keeping the public safe, we need to ensure that we have good communications between station staff and police throughout the network and on board the trains. We cannot afford to lose or regress on the skills that have been developed over time. We are talking about 284 staff and officers who have gained those skills over numerous years and built up a specialism.

We must respect specialism in the police, but many issues are now pulling that expertise away from the service. Many people say they will leave—I believe it is 16% of experienced officers and staff—with 14% going elsewhere in the British Transport police and 22% uncertain over the future. They are uncertain because there is no clarity on pensions and terms and conditions. We are talking about not only existing staff, but the future workforce, who have not been referred to in the debate.

I welcome Audit Scotland’s reviewing the debacle that this has turned out to be, but I also press it on the Minister today that we should see a pause in the laying of orders before the House and ensure that the work goes back to the scoping phase, to reflect properly on the responses to the consultation, which reject the SNP's proposals, and instead to put forward a sensible model of greater alignment and collaboration as we move forward, thereby ensuring that public safety is put first.

10.47 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on securing today’s debate on this important subject. I am aware of his long-standing interest in this matter, both as a Member of this House and previously while a Member of the Scottish Parliament. Before setting out the Government’s position, I would like to make a point that I am sure we all agree about: that the continuing safety and security of the travelling public and of the staff who work on our railways must remain our No. 1 priority in this matter.

As hon. Members will be aware, the decision to devolve the functions of the British Transport police honours the cross-party Smith commission agreement, which explicitly set out that “the functions of the British Transport Police in Scotland will be a devolved matter”.

The Scotland Act 2016 gives effect to that recommendation. Legislative competence for railway policing in Scotland has been devolved. The Scottish Government have stated their intention to integrate the Scottish Division of the BTP into Police Scotland, and the Scottish Parliament has passed legislation setting out the Scottish Government’s plans for the future policing of the railway. The process of devolution is therefore under way. It is now for the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament to use the powers they have been given.

For our part, the UK Government are committed to devolution and to delivering the Smith commission’s recommendations in full. We have been working closely and effectively with the Scottish Government, the two police forces and the two police authorities through a joint programme board, which has been established to oversee the delivery process. We want to see a smooth transition to the new arrangements for policing the railways, with the focus on ensuring that the safety and security of rail passengers and staff remain at the forefront of the process and that the UK’s interests are fully recognised and protected.

Significant progress has been made on a number of aspects of integration, including in preparing the secondary legislation that will transfer those BTP officers and staff currently responsible for policing the railways in Scotland to Police Scotland, and on mapping their terms and conditions. The hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) asked when we would lay orders in question. We had planned to lay them in the autumn, but given the delay until a new plan and timeline for the project has been determined, we do not know now when we will lay them.

It needs to be said that any deferral will be for a period of one or perhaps more years, because of the contractual arrangements through which policing costs are recovered by the British Transport police authority from train operators. The transfer can take place only at the start of any given financial year, so we need Police Scotland, working with the BTPA, to commit to a specific, achievable deadline by when it will be operationally ready to deliver the transferred functions, as and when it is in a position to actually receive them. That timeline must work for the BTPA, ensuring that the BTP can continue to focus on its critical activities.

We have been very clear throughout this process that it is our intention that the transfer should take place on an as is basis, ensuring that transferring officers and staff see no change in their terms and status. My hon. Friend the Member for Moray and the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) mentioned pensions. We are currently working with the pension trustees on how best to deliver the commitment that pensions will be preserved. The question is how that can be best achieved while ensuring that costs fall where they should. The UK cannot cross-subsidise police pensions in Scotland after the transfer.
Last month, the joint programme board was advised by Police Scotland and the BTPA that a number of significant operational issues remain to be resolved, and that the scheduled transfer date of 1 April 2019 could not be achieved without undue risk to rail staff and passengers, with further time needed to deliver integration most effectively and safely for railway passengers, staff and officers.

In particular, a number of issues were raised about the integration of critical functions, such as ICT, with Police Scotland’s systems. Police Scotland has found itself unprepared to receive the transfer. Scottish Ministers accepted that advice, and a detailed re-planning exercise, supported by external advisors, will now take place to ensure that robust delivery plans are in place and to establish a new delivery date. That will allow also for increased engagement with both industry and staff.

I welcome the Scottish Government’s decision to listen to concerns and criticism and to agree to delay the transfer. I also recognise the concerns raised by hon. Members about Police Scotland’s ability to take on railway policing. Our No. 1 priority remains the safety of the public, and all parties agree that the transfer cannot take place until it is safe for that to happen. However, let me be clear: this is a delay to an agreed process. The Scottish Government have been clear that the transfer will still happen—that is their decision—but only when they are satisfied that all of the necessary actions have been completed.

I must again emphasise that this is devolution at work. The Scottish Government have the power to take decisions and therefore have to take responsibility for the outcomes of those decisions. For our part, the UK Government remain fully committed to delivering the devolution of railway policing, and will in due course bring forward the secondary legislation required in the UK Parliament to enable that to happen.

I assure hon. Members that, as with any effective relationship, we will continue to be absolutely clear and frank with our partners in the Scottish Government as this process continues.

Ian Murray: The Minister talks about being open and frank with his colleagues in the Scottish Government. Will he therefore use this time, while the integration programme has been paused because of the reasons outlined, to look at the commissioning model that seems to have support across the industry and the House, and to impress on those colleagues, through frank and open discussions, that that model might be the best way forward?

Joseph Johnson: Railway policing has now been devolved to Scotland, and it is therefore the domain and the prerogative of the Scottish Government to determine how best those responsibilities can be discharged. The commissioning route that the hon. Gentleman prefers is not the policy choice of the Scottish Government. It is now for them to deliver on devolution and to make it work as best they can, with the UK Government playing a supporting role.

Mr Sweeney: Does the Minister agree that devolution is not necessarily about the Scottish Government having full oversight of this, and that there is nothing to stop those of us with electoral mandates to represent the people of Scotland from offering a view? The UK Government should also not shrink from offering their preferred view of what should happen. This is not the nature or the spirit of the collaboration that should underpin devolution.

Joseph Johnson: We will continue to work collaboratively with our colleagues in Scotland to ensure the smooth transfer of powers. We all have the interests and the safety of the passengers and the staff working on our railways at heart. We want to put in place sustainable and endurable arrangements within the framework of law set by the devolution settlement.

I assure hon. Members that, working through the joint programme board, we will be ready to challenge the approach where it is necessary to do so in the interests of passengers, officers and staff and the security of the country. We will continue to ensure that the UK’s interests are fully protected, including by ensuring that the critical, specialist work of the BTP in England and Wales continues to protect rail users and staff.

10.57 am

Douglas Ross: First, I thank you, Mr Hollobone, for the way you have chaired this robust but respectful debate. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) and the hon. Members for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) and for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney). I also thank the Front-Bench spokespeople for their contributions, particularly the Minister.

I have to pick up on a couple of points from the speeches made by Scottish National party Members, which I have to say were disappointing. They mentioned that terms and conditions had been progressed. This is an issue that we have considerable concern over, but SNP Members seem quite happy. However, their own Justice Minister in Scotland, Michael Matheson, said that the pause would allow extra time to allow more engagement with the BTP Federation on pay and conditions. Even their own Justice Minister in Scotland does not think they have gone far enough on that.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) mentioned IT and how that would be a significant operational issue. Even their own Justice Minister in Scotland, Michael Matheson, said that the terms and conditions had been progressed. This is an issue that we have considerable concern over, but SNP Members seem quite happy. However, their own Justice Minister in Scotland, Michael Matheson, said that the pause would allow extra time to allow more engagement with the BTP Federation on pay and conditions. Even their own Justice Minister in Scotland does not think they have gone far enough on that.

We are all fortunate in Scotland to have the strong influence of BTP officers in our constituencies. In my constituency of Moray, they were very active during the recent construction of the new Forres railway station. I welcome the support that we have had from pretty much across the Chamber for the pause to now be used as an opportunity to consider options going forward. I am disappointed that SNP Members trotted out the party mantra, unwilling to look at alternative options. However, there are options, and we are in a pause, so we should look at them. They would allow us to respect the devolution settlement and the views of experts.
I will use my final words to praise the commitment, dedication and expertise of British Transport police officers, and indeed all Police Scotland officers. Their unstinting service keeps us safe across Scotland and the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

That this House has considered proposals for the merger of British Transport Police Scottish division with Police Scotland.

Childhood Obesity: Bexley

10.59 am

David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered childhood obesity in Bexley.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am particularly delighted to see here my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), a constituency neighbour and personal friend; we work together for Bexley. We are glad to see him back in his seat after his recent illness; indeed, we are delighted to see him here today.

I am grateful to be able to raise what is both an extremely important health issue in my borough of Bexley and a national concern—namely, childhood obesity. This is an opportune moment to raise the issue of obesity, because today Public Health England chief executive Duncan Selbie is urging shops and food outlets to reduce portion sizes by 20% within the next six years after stating that obesity has become “the norm”. Indeed, he is today launching the One You campaign, with the slogan “400-600-600”—the number of calories that people should eat at breakfast, lunch and dinner. He says that the issue of overweight or obese children needs to be addressed. PHE nutritionist Dr Alison Tedstone says that children are consuming 500 calories a day more than they require; that is equivalent to another meal. Therefore, as I said, this is an opportune moment to raise the issue.

Bexley is a great place to live and work in, and I am delighted to have been a resident of Barnehurst for a considerable time, because there is so much to see and do. I urge you, Mr Hollobone, and my hon. Friend the Minister to come down to Bexley sometime and see the huge opportunities that there are to visit the parks, stately homes and other facilities that are so good.

James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his very kind wishes on my return to duties at Westminster. I support him in this debate and what he says about the London Borough of Bexley. He has rightly focused on the comments this morning by Public Health England. Obviously, part of this issue is what goes into ready meals and things like that. What thoughts does he have on what Public Health England has said about ingredients and what goes into so much of the food on the supermarket shelves that we buy, and the impact that that is having? He is making really important points this morning.

David Evennett: That is a very valid point. Recipes, portion sizes and calories need to be looked at and addressed. I urge all restaurants, fast food outlets and food manufacturers to look seriously at how they can reduce people’s salt, sugar and calorie intake. We have to address that, as I am sure the Minister will accept later.

The statistics for childhood obesity in Bexley are mixed when compared with those for the rest of England. There are areas of public health where we do much better, and I will highlight the stop smoking campaign, which has been very successful across our borough, but unfortunately childhood obesity is a real issue in the borough and needs attention.
It is widely accepted by health experts that once weight is gained, it is difficult to lose. The Government have called childhood obesity “one of the top public health challenges for this generation”. That is certainly the case for Bexley. The Government are well aware of the issue nationally and are being proactive in addressing the concerns. The childhood obesity plan in 2016 was a welcome step forward, but plans need to be actioned; we are looking for results and outcomes. Measures in the plan included the soft drinks industry levy, which will apply to manufacturers; a recommitment to the Healthy Start voucher scheme, enabling low-income families to buy fruit and vegetables; and action to increase physical activity in schools. We all appreciate that there is no quick fix, but that is the first step on a long journey that aims to “significantly reduce England’s rate of childhood obesity within the next ten years.”

We do need an understanding and a culture change.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter to the House. It is in the news every day—and indeed, it is in the news this morning—and it is very important for people back home in Northern Ireland. “Childhood obesity in Bexley” is the heading for this Westminster Hall debate on the Order Paper, but in Northern Ireland we have similar figures—of children aged between two and 15, 17% are classed as overweight and 8% as obese. Does the right hon. Gentleman feel that it is time for the Department for Education and the Department of Health and social care to work together to put in place a strategy to reduce childhood obesity, which would clearly involve schools?

David Evennett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and totally agree with him. I think that the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care are working together, but more needs to be done. I appreciate that this is not just a Bexley issue—it also matters to the people of Northern Ireland and across the country—but I specified Bexley because it is particularly bad compared with other places.

The earlier a child is exposed to obesity, the earlier they can experience medical consequences and problems. In fact, a study by Cancer Research UK found that obesity could cause 670,000 cases of cancer nationally over the next 20 years, plus millions more cases of other diseases, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke. Obesity and the medical problems stemming from it cause problems for our whole society. It causes a loss of productivity in the workforce. It restricts opportunities for individuals. And it adds another burden on to our NHS. In fact, Cancer Research UK also claims that the cost to the NHS per year by 2035 could be an additional £2.5 billion, over and above what is already spent on obesity-related diseases. Of course, quality of life can also be reduced by being heavily overweight, as that restricts opportunities and choices.

Childhood obesity is strongly linked to adult obesity. According to the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, four in five obese schoolchildren are likely to be dangerously overweight for life. Therefore, we have to act early, before there are serious consequences from something that is avoidable. I have said that, statistically, Bexley is not performing well, unlike other areas, where provision and action are good. In Bexley, the prevalence of overweight or obesity among children in reception classes is 26.7%. That is worse than in London in general and in England in total. In year 6, the figure in Bexley increases to 39.4%, which is almost one percentage point higher than the London average and more than five percentage points higher than the England average. That is very disappointing. When we consider that in Bexley 12.3% of reception age children and 24% of year 6 children are obese, it is a real cause for concern. Let us look at the trends over time. The number of overweight or obese reception age children in Bexley increased from 20% in 2007 to 26.7% last year. That is why we are raising this issue today with the Minister—to highlight the issues that we have in Bexley.

Diets, of course, play a very important role in lifestyle. Approximately 54% of adults in Bexley meet the “five a day” recommendation for fruit and vegetables. Again, that percentage is below the London and national averages. It does not set a good example for our children. Sadly, children do follow their parents and grandparents, and when habits are formed young, the consequences are great. We need to promote and pursue the importance of fruit and vegetables. Fruit can be an enjoyable snack and an alternative to chocolate, cake and sweets, while a diversity of vegetables is essential to a balanced diet.

Bexley Council—a good, Conservative-led council—is taking action. Just over a year ago, Bexley joined the nationwide Sugar Smart campaign led by Jamie Oliver. The aims of the campaign for us are to educate people and raise awareness across Bexley about the harmful effects of excess sugar consumption, and to reduce individuals’ sugar intake across the borough. The council is encouraging local organisations and businesses to participate in the campaign and support this very important initiative. Bexley has now signed up to the campaign 16 participants, including a number of schools, and I hope that the figure continues to grow during the rest of this year, because that is a very important facility and opportunity.

I am grateful for the information that has been given to me by Dr Anjan Ghosh, who is the director of public health and deputy director of health and wellbeing at the London Borough of Bexley. Dr Ghosh advises that the Bexley health and wellbeing board recently signed off on the development of a system-wide prevention strategy that is far reaching and ambitious in scope and has the potential to harness council, NHS and community assets in improving health and wellbeing outcomes, helping Bexley residents to start well, live well and age well. The strategy is currently in development, and part of that involves developing an obesity strategy for Bexley that has the same population health focus.

Part of the work is to unpick why obesity statistics in Bexley are poor compared with statistically and demographically similar London boroughs. The programme includes a two-tier child weight management programme for children aged four to 11 and their families, a family lifestyle programme and guidance to support healthier living, eating and lifestyles. Each category programme is designed specifically to provide age-appropriate messages, activities and behavioural change that will benefit the whole family. Once the 12-week programme is over, there will still be access for the families and young people to drop in, to update themselves and take the service further.

I know that schools and teachers are doing their very best to advise children, as well as to educate and support them to eat well. However, parents, as the primary
educators, have primary responsibility and we need more support from parents. The scale of the issue is huge. I will not go through the statistics of how many biscuits, cakes, ice-creams and all those type of foods are consumed by young people every year, or how many calories those foods and fizzy drinks contain.

One has to say that it is a worry to see secondary school children coming out of school in the afternoon into Bexleyheath, going to the fast food outlets in the town and consuming burgers and chips, which have an enormous calorie intake. That is a huge concern. There has been an increase in our borough of waffle shops, ice cream parlours and other fast-food outlets. While it is good to see business thriving, it is worrying that some are exacerbating the problem and increasing the sugar and calorie intake of our youngsters. Treats are fine for special occasions, but should not be the mainstay of an individual’s diet. I am not a killjoy, but everything should be in moderation. In addition, I think that many of us eat too much and have portions that are too large. That is why the report I have highlighted this morning is so important.

Jim Shannon: Further to that point, on the news this morning they were saying that they were not against the idea of fast-food outlets, but we should have smaller portions. In other words, if we start with smaller portions, it will be a step in the right direction and maybe that is the way to go forward.

David Evennett: I think that is absolutely right. The hon. Gentleman highlights the calorie content and intake, which is so important.

I also want to highlight physical activity, or inactivity, which is a huge problem that can lead to obesity and is the fourth leading cause of global mortality. Increasing activity levels could help to prevent a number of illnesses, including cancer and diabetes. Regrettably, in Bexley, over 21% of adults are physically inactive.

I was honoured and privileged to serve as Sports Minister in the then Department for Culture, Media and Sport for the first half of 2016, while covering the maternity leave of my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). It was a brilliant experience to go around the country and see first-hand how sport can make a real, positive impact on people’s lives. We must promote the wide range of sports available out there and their benefits. Sports participation is a great way for young people in particular to become physically active, improve their health and fitness, and—depending on the sport—to be part of a team, socialise and be part of something, gain motivation and confidence, and also have fun. We all know that sport is fun.

I know that the Minister will agree with me on that. I used to be a keen tennis player. I do not get time for that now, but I am still a keen walker. We have places such as Hall Place and Danson Park in our borough, where one can have a good walk. It is a really invigorating experience. I also enjoy going to north Norfolk and Sheringham Park with my wife, Marilyn, and we have long walks along the north Norfolk coast. That is important exercise.

In conclusion, we must take action on all fronts. The concern is not only the advertising and promotion—in supermarkets we still see the calorie-laden chocolates and what have you by the check-out, which is a worry too—but what parents are feeding their children and the fast foods. The intake of sugar and salt is too high. The issue is people making sensible lifestyle choices, to ensure that they are eating healthily and looking after their health. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister is aware of the serious issues across the country. Government, industry, schools, the NHS, families and friends all have a part to play to ensure that we are eating and living healthily.

The benefits of reducing childhood obesity are clear. It will save lives, but it will improve the quality of young people’s lives, which is important. Education is the key. We need to educate our children and businesses. We need to encourage everyone to be more active and eat better. We need more promotion of sports and to continue to reduce children’s calorie and sugar intake. We need to educate parents and grandparents on the risks of lifestyle to themselves and their families. Of course, publicity and promotion are important, essential in fact. Politicians at local and national level should get on board too and need to be engaged to achieve results. For our Borough of Bexley, we need results. I look to my hon. Friend the Minister, who I know well, to take these matters seriously and give us the lead.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): Let me start by repeating what was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (David Evennett): childhood obesity remains one of the top public health challenges, if not the top one, facing this generation. I have said that in this Chamber before, and I welcome any chance to debate this subject. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the debate. I also echo his words about how nice it is to see my right hon. Friend. I was in Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) back in his place. He is my dear friend and I worked closely with him when he was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. We have said many prayers for him in the last few months. It is great to see him back in his place.

As right hon. and hon. Members will be aware, the latest figures, which I pore over, continue to show us that child obesity rates in England remain way too high. Almost a quarter of children are overweight or obese when they start primary school. Probably more worrying is the fact that that figure rises to around a third by the time they leave primary school.

Evidence shows us that the deprivation gap in obesity prevalence between children in the most and least deprived areas is increasing. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford gave figures for Bexley, and he was right to, but let me give some national averages. Obesity prevalence among children in reception living in the most deprived areas was 12.7%, compared with just 5.8% among those living in the least deprived areas. In year 6—the final year of primary school—those figures were 26.3% and 11.4% respectively. That gap worries me. It should worry us all. It continues to widen. This is one of the great burning injustices of our times; the Prime Minister has used that phrase, and she is dead right. My view is that we have not just a right to act, but a responsibility to act as a Government with a publicly-funded health system.
Bexley is fairly affluent, but there are areas of significant deprivation, as there are in all of our constituencies. Data for Bexley show higher rates of excess weight in children than the national average for London and for England. Also, obesity prevalence has remained higher than the national average, as my right hon. Friend said. Friend said, for over five years, so he is right to highlight the issue. The impact for Bexley and the rest of the country was highlighted just last week through new analysis by my good friends and partners at Cancer Research UK suggesting that millennials are on course to be the most overweight generation in history. That should and does worry us greatly.

We know that obese children are much more likely to become obese adults; it is very hard to lose the weight, as my right hon. Friend said. That increases their risk of developing the serious diseases that I speak about as part of my portfolio, including type 2 diabetes. There was a lot of press coverage and an Adjournment debate in the House last week about the sheer number of people picking up type 2 diabetes, which is an entirely preventable condition. It increases your risk of heart disease and some types of cancer, including bowel and breast, two of the most common cancers, which is why CRUK are rightly so active in this space. It is also a major risk factor for non-alcoholic fatty liver disease.

We launched our child obesity plan in August 2016, as my right hon. Friend rightly said. It was a very robust piece of work informed by the latest evidence and research in the area. As the heart of the plan is a simple desire to change the nature of food that children eat and to make it easier for families and parents—who play a key role—to make healthier choices for them and for the country.

The plan is a challenge—and it is meant to be—to us in national Government as well as those in local government, which I will come on to, in businesses, in the NHS, and in schools and families. We all have a role to play in reducing child obesity levels. In developing the plan, my officials and my predecessors have been clear, as I am, that we have considered a number of different policies. We have focused on the ones that are likely to have the biggest impact on preventing child obesity.

As my right hon. Friend will remember, key measures in the plan include the soft drinks industry levy, which was announced by the previous Chancellor; the sugar reduction and wider reformulation programme; and helping children to enjoy an hour of physical activity every day, which is so important.

Since we published the plan, real progress has been made on sugar reduction. The soft drinks industry levy will come into effect in April—it is important to remember that it has not yet come into force, but it is nudging behaviour. Public Health England has formulated a comprehensive sugar reduction programme with the aim of a 20% reduction in sugar in key foods by 2020, including a 5% reduction in year one. We will be judging that shortly to see where progress has been made.

Companies, such as the makers of Lucozade, are important. I visited the headquarters of Ribena, the Suntory brand, in Uxbridge earlier this year. I pay great tribute to its work. I was in the lab testing the new Ribena, which goes live this week.

**Steve Brine:** It was very nice and very refreshing. As a company, Ribena has taken a hit in doing that, but it reports great staff satisfaction and a feeling that it is doing the right thing. As the Minister, I have never been afraid to call out businesses that are making poor choices and those that are making the right choices. Ribena is making the right choices.

Kellogg’s also made a good decision about the reformulation of sugar in its cereals, which sit on my children’s breakfast table every morning. Tesco, Waitrose and Nestlé have led the way by removing millions of tonnes of sugar from their products and they deserve credit for that. We expect almost half of all drinks that would otherwise have been in-scope of the soft drinks industry levy to have been reformulated by the time it comes in. That is a crucial step towards improving our children’s health, as data shows that sugary soft drinks are the main contributor of sugar in our children’s diets.

My right hon. Friends might be thinking that we will be victims of our own success, because the industry levy will not produce the revenue so we will not be able to reinvest it. However, someone far cleverer than me, before my time, managed to persuade the Treasury—a clever, neat trick—that we will invest all the revenue we expect to get from the levy, plus what we said we hoped to raise during this Parliament, in giving school-aged children a better and healthier future, including through doubling the primary school PE and sport premium; investing in school breakfast clubs, which are so important; and providing £100 million in 2018-19 for a new healthier pupils capital fund.

As was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford and by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, this work should be done between the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care, and of course it is being. Our original plan was a cross-Government piece of work. Last month, I talked to the new Secretary of State for Education about the plan and introduced him to some of things that I want to do.

It is a joined-up conversation because, as my right hon. Friend said, schools have a huge role to play in teaching children about healthy eating. The national curriculum requires them to teach children about food, nutrition and healthy eating, and how to cook a repertoire of dishes as part of design and technology classes. Things have changed since my day, when a fish finger sandwich was one of my challenges in design and technology and I managed to get it wrong.

It is compulsory for pupils in maintained schools from key stages 1 to 3 to be taught about the principles of a healthy and varied diet and why that is important, and the national curriculum can be used as a benchmark for free schools and academies, which ordinarily sit outside it. Alongside our commitment to continue to provide free school lunches to infant pupils, which means that about 1.4 million more children are eating a healthy lunch, we are investing £26 million in breakfast clubs, using revenue from the soft drinks industry levy.

Our plan is not just about school-aged children. In November, we published a series of example menus and associated guidance to support early years settings, such as nurseries and childminders, to offer food and drink in line with Government dietary recommendations for infants and children from about six months to four years—a key cohort—before they get to primary school.
The guidance includes useful information for early years settings to show how they can meet the early years foundation stage welfare requirement to provide “healthy, balanced and nutritious” meals for children. They are also responsible for educating parents and carers to help them to prepare healthy, balanced meals at home and introduce their child to new foods. There has to be a consistent thread from the education setting to the home setting.

My right hon. Friend was right to mention local authorities, which have a key role to play in creating healthier local environments in our constituencies. They can have a significant impact in local communities through levers such as the planning system, urban design and transport strategies. There are great examples of that, such as the restrictions on new hot food takeaways in Gateshead, which is something that my right hon. Friend might want to look at. I was interested to hear from my right hon. Friend about the borough-wide prevention strategy. As the Minister with responsibility for prevention, I would be interested to hear more and I note his offer to visit him in his constituency.

Other local initiatives include last year’s London-wide great weight debate on child obesity, which several London authorities, including Bexley, took part in. Such events show how communities can make their own contributions. The results of that debate are feeding into the five-year obesity strategy being developed in Bexley, which my right hon. Friend talked about. I welcome that, because it cannot all be about what the national Government do. We have to set the framework and the ambition. Sometimes we can use the taxation system as we have with the industry levy, but local government has a key role to play. I am excited to see the progress being made.

We continue to learn from the latest evidence around the country and around the world, such as the very interesting whole-systems approach in Amsterdam that led to a reduction of 2,500 in the number of overweight and obese children between 2012 and 2015. I am talking to people there and I hope to visit at some point.

This week, as my right hon. Friend mentioned, to implement part one of the child obesity plan, we launched our ambitious calorie-reduction programme alongside Public Health England. It is ambitious: it challenges all sectors of the food and drink industry to reduce calories in everyday food by 20% by 2024. I absolutely believe the sectors can do that—we have had a brilliant and positive response from them—and yesterday’s announcement, which is in the newspapers today, is very welcome. We are confident that those measures can make an impact.

All the reports and data that we publish on our progress in delivering our world-leading childhood obesity plan will be open to scrutiny and, I hope, to further debates in this place. That will include Public Health England’s assessment of progress on sugar reduction, which I mentioned earlier and which will be published in the spring. The Obesity Policy Research Unit’s evaluation of that research will be published as individual projects are completed. We are deliberately publishing and being measured all the time, and we will use that to decide whether sufficient progress has been made and whether we need to go further.

I thank my right hon. Friends the Members for Bexleyheath and Crayford and for Old Bexley and Sidcup for their contributions, and I look forward to continuing the conversation in coming months.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.
Fire Safety and Cladding

[Mr Gary Streeter in the Chair]

Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on 18 December 2017, on the independent review of building regulations and fire safety, HC 555; oral evidence taken before the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on 15 January, on the DCLG Annual Report and Accounts 2016-17, HC 553; and correspondence between the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and Dame Judith Hackitt, relating to the independent review of building regulations and fire safety, reported to the House and published on 8 January and 29 January.

2.30 pm

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Before I call Mr Reed to open our debate on this important matter, you can all see that there is a cast of thousands. This is a very important subject. When Mr Reed has sat down, I will let you know exactly what the time limits will be. You should plan for three or four minutes, and we will see how we go.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered cladding and remedial fire safety work.

Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Streeter. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I am grateful so many colleagues have turned up to the debate, which emphasises how significant this issue is for so many of our constituents.

I first came to the issue because of a block called Citiscape in my constituency. A group of residents came to see me because the block has the same kind of cladding as Grenfell Tower: aluminium composite material—ACM—cladding with a polyethylene core. Polyethylene is a kind of compressed paraffin. At Grenfell, this cladding had the equivalent combustibility to 32,000 litres of petrol over the outside of the building, so it is understandable that Citiscape’s residents were so concerned.

The residents were told that it would cost them as leaseholders up to £31,000 per flat to remove the cladding—a bill many of them simply could not afford—and that if everybody did not pay, none of the work would start. One older resident had to cancel his move to a care home because the flat he was going to sell to pay for that move was unsellable because of the cladding on the building. These people are stuck in a building that they describe as a deathtrap, unable to move and unable to afford the cost of making their homes safe.

The industry estimates that some 800 blocks across the country have flammable cladding: 300 are council-owned and will eventually be made safe, although it is worrying that nine months after Grenfell only three have so far been completely re-clad, and around 500 blocks are privately owned, but the Government are doing nothing to help the people living in them.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has made a good start to an important debate. Does he have ideas for what more could be done to encourage owners and landlords to improve or replace the cladding on the buildings that they own?

Mr Reed: I am grateful for that question; I intend to cover exactly that in my speech. I am going to argue that it is the Government’s responsibility to remove the cladding because their flawed regulatory system is what allowed it to go up in the first place.

When I challenge the Secretary of State on this, he justifies doing nothing by pointing the finger at freeholders, whom he claims have a moral responsibility to replace the cladding. The problem is that a moral responsibility is not the same as a legal responsibility. Freeholders, like leaseholders, developers, managing agents and insurers, all deny legal liability, and so do the Government. It could take years for the courts to resolve this and all that time people would be left living in fear. On average, there is one fire every month linked to this kind of cladding. Eventually, one will not be put out in time. Is the Minister really going to do nothing and risk a second Grenfell Tower fire?

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): Decades of inaction led to the fire at Grenfell Tower and the loss of, now, 72 lives. All the fine words and sympathy in the world will not save lives. We need regulation now and a commitment of Government finance. What are we waiting for?

Mr Reed: I completely agree. I hope colleagues will forgive me if I restrict the number of interventions I take. There are so many people trying to get in on the debate that I would like to leave room for them if I can.

The Housing Minister told the House of Commons last month that he recognises no systemic problem with the fire safety regime. Let us look briefly at what he thinks is good enough. The Building Research Establishment’s fire testing system is so weak that manufacturers can design the testing rigs that test their own materials, and can then keep quiet about how many tests their materials fail before they eventually get a result they want. Developers, builders and buyers are never told, because the test results are treated as commercially confidential. Conflicts of interest are everywhere in this system. The BRE makes money by running tests on flammable materials—

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way briefly?

Mr Reed: Yes, but for the last time.

Karen Lee: The interim Hackitt report asserted on fire safety:

Those responsible for high-risk and complex buildings should be held to account to a higher degree.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that after nine months the Conservative Government have shown no willingness to act?

Mr Reed: I agree, but I hope that we will hear from the Minister that things have changed.

The BRE makes up to £40,000 per test that it conducts for manufacturers. As it also drafts the guidance, as an organisation it has a financial interest in permitting the use of combustible materials that it then tests. The fire safety tests after Grenfell were carried out by Kingspan, which manufactured part of the materials on Grenfell in the first place. Some individuals from the BRE who drafted the Government’s flawed guidance are now advising Ministers that there is not a problem with the regulations that they drafted. What a surprise! It is even possible to bypass safety tests completely by paying somebody to carry out a desktop study, which does not
involves doing any testing whatever. The privatised National House Building Council makes money by signing off flammable cladding that has never been tested, and because flammable materials—combustible materials—are cheaper to make, the industry has a perverse incentive to keep costs down by using combustible cladding.

No other country in the European Union permits a system like this. Many EU countries do not permit the use of combustible cladding at all. The UK building industry has alerted the Government to materials authorised by the BRE that subsequently failed fire safety tests in other countries. The Government chose to do nothing. The Association of British Insurers, the Royal Institute of British Architects, the Association of Residential Managing Agents and other building industry groups all want flammable cladding banned.

Back in 2013, the coroner investigating the deadly Lakanal House fire in Southwark told the Government to amend fire safety guidance “with particular regard to the spread of fire over the external envelope of a building”.

She said that BRE Approved Document B, which relates to fire safety, was unclear and needed to be reviewed. However, the Communities Secretary at the time, Eric Pickles, did not do that. Nor have a string of Housing Ministers—every one since then—taken any action, including the Prime Minister’s chief of staff, Gavin Barwell. The current Housing Minister is relatively new in post. He could take a different course. I hope he will, but it is a worrying start that a consultation is under way on further weakening these already weak fire safety regulations by extending the use of desktop studies instead of insisting on rigorous, independent fire safety tests every time.

The industry has repeatedly asked the Government for clear and unequivocal advice on how to deal with the various forms of flammable cladding being found on hundreds of buildings. I wrote to the Secretary of State in January asking for the same on the industry’s behalf. As of today, the Government have given no direction at all on how these cases are to be dealt with.

After Grenfell, the Government said that cladding with a polyethylene core, like that on Citiscape in my constituency, does not comply with the guidance. The Prime Minister repeated that claim, yet I have here a certificate signed by Sir Ken Knight, chair of the Government’s independent expert panel on fire safety and a director of the BRE Trust, that says that it does comply. Quite simply, the Government are all over the place. They do not have a clue what is going on. Every single loophole and error that led to Lakanal House and Grenfell Tower is still in place. This is no one else’s fault and no one else’s moral responsibility except the Government’s.

Thousands of frightened people living in blocks with flammable cladding need to hear from the Minister today that it will be taken down without delay. They do not need any more buck-passing. They cannot afford to spend years in the courts while the cladding remains on their buildings. The Government’s flawed fire safety regime created this mess; the Government must now clear it up. We cannot risk a second Grenfell Tower. The time for the Minister to act is now.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Thank you, Mr Reed. Colleagues can do the maths for themselves. I am going to impose a voluntary time limit of three minutes to start, but let us see how we get on.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on securing this debate on an important issue that affects my constituents in Bromley.

Let me say something about the tone of the debate. It appears that there have been failings in relation to regulation, perhaps partly because technology has moved on and awareness is greater, but the building that I am concerned with is Northpoint on Sherman Road in Bromley, a block of 57 flats that were converted from offices 15 years ago, and to suggest that responsibility lies with any one party is inaccurate. When the flats were converted in 2003—under a Labour Government, as it happens—the cladding was considered acceptable according to what was known at the time. A subsequent inspection in November 2017 led the fire brigade to conclude that it was not acceptable, so an enforcement notice was served.

Whatever the history of the 57 flats, the residents are now placed in an impossible financial situation. The flats are on lease from a private freeholder, a commercial company. The leaseholders have spent some £80,000 on a two-man, 24-hour “waking watch” on the premises, and if the building has to be re-clad, the costs are likely to be in the hundreds of thousands. They are in a difficult situation, because the developer’s 10-year guarantee is out of date and the freeholder is a commercial company.

I understand the Secretary of State’s point about a moral duty, but as the hon. Member for Croydon North rightly said, a moral duty is not legally enforceable. In any event, the directors of a commercial company have a fiduciary duty to their shareholders, so they face a conflict. That creates a bind for the residents, who are forking out £6,000-odd a month for the ongoing costs of the waking watch. The normal sinking fund that they prudently set in place has long been exhausted. Their own funds will soon be exhausted, too, and the flats are unsaleable because no one will buy them in the circumstances. Many of the residents are young professionals; I received a letter from one constituent whose flat was the first home that she and her husband were able to buy. They have no chance of moving on—they are stuck with an asset that has turned into a liability.

I hope the Minister will come up with something more specific than what has been proposed. I understand that interest-free loans have been suggested, but a lot of these people are already suffering, so how will they repay the capital? I am glad that additional funding has been made available to the Leasehold Advisory Service, but again, that does not address the underlying situation. A failure of regulation is a failure of governance, whoever was in government at the time, so ultimately the Government need to stand behind those affected, rather than expecting the costs to be picked up by individuals who did nothing and had no control over what happened.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Streeter. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on securing this important debate.
I will be brief, Mr Streeter, as you have told me to be. I have two questions for the Minister. First, who should pay for the removal and replacement of unsafe cladding and for the interim remedial measures, such as fire marshals and temporary alarm systems? Secondly, when will we see progress on the review of Approved Document B, and can we have an update on the BS 8414 test?

On the first question, the Government are clear that they want landlords to pay, as they have repeatedly exhorted them to. In the social sector, with registered social landlords and local authorities, they have been largely successful, but in the private sector the opposite is true. Many freeholders and property management companies take the view opposite to the Government’s. As the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership has reported, companies take the view opposite to the Government’s position.

The social sector and the council are to be commended for their quick response to the need to remove and replace cladding, but the response in the private sector has been woefully poor. It has been very hard to get hold of many of the owners of the blocks, and it has been hard to get answers from managing agents about what they will do. Leaseholders and homeowners have been left to bear the brunt.

I want to highlight two specific cases in my constituency. The cladding on the Chips building has been deemed non-fire-retardant. That was known at the time, but it was still signed off, and leaseholders are now being charged well over £5,000 each to put it right. The cladding on the Little Alex block was within regulations at the time, but following an inspection it has now been deemed to fall outside them. A prohibition notice has been issued; again, it falls on leaseholders to meet the costs, which will be well in excess of £175,000. That is just unacceptable. It is not the leaseholders’ fault, yet they are footing the bill.

Who foots the bill is one issue, but I really hope the Minister recognises that this is not just about money. Leaseholders have no right of recourse. Who are they supposed to go to? The Government say that developers and owners have a moral duty to take action, but there is no body to which leaseholders can turn for recourse. Bodies such as first-tier tribunals are frankly toothless; they do not follow through and are very bureaucratic.

Hundreds of people in Manchester and elsewhere are now stuck between a rock and a hard place. As the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) rightly said, this is a failure of governance and of regulation. It is our job in Parliament, and the Government’s job, to put that right for the people who are now stuck in unsafe buildings that they are unable to sell.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I hope that hon. Members will accept that I may not be able to stay until the end of the debate: I am on an extended convalescence from a bad leg. I welcome the initiative of the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) to address low standards—a point also raised by the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed).

I have one or two points to make to the Government. First, the cost of remedy, especially for the leaseholders I am concerned with, in addition to everyone else affected, could be reduced if the Government waived the VAT on the cost of remedial works. That would reduce a £120,000 charge to £100,000, which would be worthwhile for all concerned. The second point is that leaseholders, apparently, do not have a right to get in touch with anybody legally about these issues; they are not party to the insurance or to the building and they are not written in anywhere. I ask the Government to find some way of deeming that leaseholders do have an interest and retrospectively have had an interest in the people who put up these blocks and the people who run them.

I have a third suggestion; many of my suggestions come from the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, which has already been mentioned by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). It is that every freeholder of every block affected should declare who they are and how they will respond. Leaseholders do have an interest and retrospectively have had an interest in the people who put up these blocks and the people who run them.
We accept that there will be many legal disputes. My suggestion is that the Government should get all the parties together and try to get a test case in front of the Supreme Court as quickly as possible, preferably within the next six months, to determine who has what liabilities. Once that is settled, it will be easy to see the people who are left out.

Whether the developments are the converted office blocks mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) or purpose-built residential blocks, we ought to be able to recognise an analogy with cars. Even if a car passed the tests for it to be sold new, if a defect turns up the car manufacturer still has the responsibility to put it right. Martin Boyd of the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership has made that point very clearly—I make it, too, on behalf of the all-party group on leasehold reform.

The leaseholders are particularly stuck. In social housing, we know that the tenants will not have to pay. We also know that by law a leaseholder is a tenant. I think we should put leaseholders in the same situation as social housing tenants, otherwise we will freeze too much of our housing.

I am grateful to have had the chance to make some of these points at length; one could make them at greater length. Nevertheless, the hon. Member for Croydon North has done a favour to the House and to the country in securing this debate, and I hope that the Government will be able to move forward today and in days to come.

There are some simple remedies. However, like my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), who secured this debate, I do not know why we allow combustible or limited combustibility cladding and insulation to be used any more. It is not used in other European countries, as has been said. That is why I am glad to see that public landlords have taken the advice not to use such cladding and instead are using mineral wool or other forms of cladding or insulation that are available.

However, I am afraid that these issues have to be addressed, and addressed now, by the Government. As we have seen in the trade press recently, the idea that desktop studies will be extended, and will become the norm rather than just being used occasionally, is horrifying.

Also, regarding the conflicts of interest at the BRE and the inadequacy of Approved Document B, some of us have known about them for many years and we have all known about them since Grenfell. As I understand it, although the Hackitt review is good as far as it goes, it does not look as if the final report—let alone the interim one—will give us clear guidance on these issues. It will say that the culture is wrong, but what it will not do is tell landlords—responsible landlords—what they should do. Has that review of Approved Document B got under way and, if it has, when is it due to report and when can we actually tell our landlords what should happen?

I commend the all-party group on fire safety and rescue for the work that it has done on this issue. I have attended a number of seminars on it. However, the Government have to act on it. It cannot be left to the industry alone or to us alone. We must have a solution.

2.51 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Someone living in a high-rise flat in Hammersmith or Shepherd’s Bush looks at Grenfell Tower every day; a year before the Grenfell Tower fire, they will also have seen the very serious tower block fire at Shepherd’s Court on Shepherd’s Bush Green.

There has been a response from the local authority and from public landlords to what has happened. Shepherd’s Bush Housing Group told me today that it has spent almost £1 million so far on remedial works post-Grenfell. It will not charge its leaseholders for those works, but ultimately the money for them will come from its tenants. The Government should be responsible for funding this work, but they are showing a lack of leadership and of responsibility in this regard.

Let me be specific and give the example of two blocks, both of which were built in the last 10 years. One is owned by Shepherd’s Bush Housing Group and is called Kelway House. After initially failing the Buildings Research Establishment test, it passed it. However, residents do not know whether those tests are robust or not and they are still concerned about them.

The second block is Cranston Court in White City, which is owned by Notting Hill Housing, and it failed those tests. Notting Hill Housing is removing the cladding on Cranston Court and it has acted responsibly in doing so. It is putting up temporary cladding, so that it can remove fire wardens, but it does not know what to do next. It has now resolved that it will put up non-combustible solid aluminium panels. However, that is because there is no guidance; it is taking what it hopes is the safest option.

2.54 pm

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I will speak very briefly, because a great many lives were lost and that always makes debates run hot. Also, given that there is an important theme to this debate about who is going to pay for works, I have no wish to divert the Chamber’s attention from that.

However, I wish to follow the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who has just made comments about insulation, because BS 8414 is a tough test. It also failed cladding that was non-combustible. The reason for adding this observation to the debate is that the situation is not as clear cut as we would all like it to be. This is an extremely difficult subject.

For that matter, the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), who opened the debate, said that the cladding on Grenfell Tower was made by Kingspan. Kingspan has a factory in my constituency and that cladding was not made by Kingspan—it was made by a company called Reynobond and the majority of the insulation in Grenfell was made by a company called Celotex. I feel that it is helpful, given that all the experts are here, just to put a few of those facts on the record.

2.56 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on securing this very important debate.

I will highlight the plight of leaseholders in Heyesmoor Heights, Liverpool—it is a 16-storey building. Those leaseholders are now being presented with bills for £18,000 each to replace dangerous cladding and to
provide fire safety measures that have been deemed essential following the Grenfell Tower disaster. I commend the very swift action taken by Merseyside fire and rescue service; it acted very quickly. The dangerous cladding has now been removed from Heysmoor Heights and alternative covering is now in the process of being put up. However, as I say, the leaseholders are facing these bills.

I wrote to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government about this issue and on 11 December he replied. He stated that, in such situations:

“I urged those with responsibility to follow the lead from the social sector and private companies already doing the right thing, and not attempt to pass on costs to leaseholders.”

That is simply not happening. At Heysmoor Heights, leaseholders of modest means are being asked to find £18,000 each, and the fact that payment plans are being discussed does not make any difference to that essential figure. That is a bill for £18,000 to keep people safe in a situation that they could not possibly have anticipated.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Is that situation not an illustration of the terrible leaseholder landlordism, which treats leaseholders as tenants when it is convenient for the landlord and as property owners when it is not?

Mrs Ellman: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I call on the Minister to honour the commitment that the Secretary of State made in his letter to me. This issue is about leaseholders. They face paying bills to keep them safe and they could not possibly have anticipated this situation. I call on the Minister to honour what has been said. Leaseholders should not face these bills.

2.58 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on securing this important and timely debate. I have heard from many of my constituents in Battersea, including leaseholders, who are concerned about the fire safety of their homes, and the answer to those concerns is clearly stronger regulation and better enforcement by the Government. Many leaseholders are discovering not only that their buildings do not meet fire safety standards but that they will incur eye-watering bills to remedy the failings. It cannot be right for the Government to allow leaseholders to pay for failures that are not of their making.

This is not the first time I have raised the issue. In December last year, I asked what plans the Government had to ensure that private sector leaseholders were not held to ransom by freeholders over fire safety repairs. The Minister for Housing responded by talking about increased funding for the Leasehold Advisory Service, and about how the Secretary of State would “encourage” private sector freeholders not to pass on their costs, but gentle encouragement has achieved nothing, and that is a potential catastrophe for the leaseholders of the blocks. Constituents have told me that they felt physically sick when they heard that they might have to meet the costs. In Battersea, the leaseholders of Sesame Apartments—a block completed only in 2014—face the prospect of being asked to pay an eye-watering £40,000 per flat to ensure that their block meets fire safety standards, news that came after a fire there last year revealed that fire safety standards were not being met, as did subsequent testing of the cladding. That cladding must now be replaced; a fire alarm system is due to be installed and a round-the-clock warden has been introduced. However, the block’s safety should never have been in doubt, and the cost of remediating the failures should be borne not by the leaseholders but by those responsible for them.

The London Borough of Wandsworth is seeking to retrofit sprinklers in all blocks of 10 storeys or higher, which is a good thing, but they wish to pass on the costs to the leaseholders and have sought guidance on how to proceed from the first-tier tribunal. While the legal questions remain unresolved, people are still living in unsafe buildings, and every day that goes by there is the
risk of a disaster. It is only right that the Government do everything they can to ensure that repairs are carried out as soon as possible, but we need more than Government loans that leave leaseholders footing the bill. That is why, for the second time in four months, I ask the Minister what concrete action the Government are taking to ensure that homes are safe and that families and leaseholders are not held to ransom. The Government cannot go on simply applying gentle pressure on freeholders and talking about learning the lessons of Grenfell.

Nearly a year has passed. Residents deserve to live in safe buildings and we need to find a way of protecting leaseholders from being hit by life-shattering bills. The Government need to accept that they are responsible and that they must take action.

3.5 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Streeter. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) for securing the debate.

Last June, the nation was horrified to see images of smoke billowing out from Grenfell Tower, with residents trapped inside. It felt as though what was a national tragedy would be met by a national response, to ensure that such circumstances would never happen again, in London, or in Devon. In Mount Wise, in Devonport in my constituency, we have three tower blocks with combustible cladding, housing both leaseholders and social renters and, eight months on, too little has been done by the Government to prevent a similar tragedy from unfolding.

The grime artist Stormzy made his views clear at last month’s Brits. I think he spoke for most of us here when he said, “Theresa May, where’s the money for Grenfell?” I have a similar question for the Minister. Where is the money that was promised to support local authorities and housing associations in the removal of combustible cladding and the re-cladding of tower blocks in Plymouth? The most outrageous thing about this injustice is that there is money to pay for it. We know that, because last week the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government gave £1.1 billion of the money in his budget that could have been spent on re-cladding back to the Treasury, as reported by HuffPost on 4 March.

His decision was based on the idea that the money was no longer required. His memorandum for the 2017-18 financial year stated:

“The Department has surrendered £817 million of budget that is no longer required in 2017/18”.

I think that residents of Lynher House, Tavy House and Tamar House in Mount Wise would say that the money was urgently required and that it should have been spent on re-cladding tower blocks. I think that hon. Members right across the House will agree that the money was required and that it could have been used by Ministers.

Small housing associations, such as Plymouth Community Homes, have done a fantastic job of securing and making safe as much of the tower blocks as they can—have 60-minute fire doors, sprinklers being installed and 24-hour fire marshals—but Plymouth cannot afford the £13 million to £20 million it will cost to re-clad the three tower blocks. Will the Minister confirm that his Department returned that money to the Treasury, and will he ask for the money back, so that it can be spent on re-cladding tower blocks, not only in Plymouth but right across the country, to ensure that people can live in safe homes?

In her statement on 22 June 2017, the Prime Minister said:

“We cannot and will not ask people to live in unsafe homes.”—[Official Report, 22 June 2017, Vol. 626, c. 169.]

However, that is precisely what will happen if money is not spent to take action. There is an opportunity here, as was mentioned earlier, for this to be a cross-party moment, with all parties uniting to ensure that everyone lives in a safe home. That opportunity has not yet been taken by politicians, but it is being taken by people in communities who are fighting to secure their homes. Minister, please get that money back and let us spend it on cladding.

3.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on securing the debate and on laying out the scene so very well, and also right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed so passionately on an issue that they have lived.

I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group for healthy homes and buildings and the issue is of great personal interest. Moreover, the tragedy of Grenfell continues to resonate with me and with all Members of the House, and some of them have said that several months later they are wondering just what is going on. That is the question. This is one of those times when actions speak louder than words, and what would be better than to see the actions of people who are in a position to change things? That is why I am sincerely grateful that the hon. Member for Croydon North has brought the debate to Westminster Hall.

Most of us typically live and spend 90% of our time inside buildings of one sort or another, so our homes and buildings should first and foremost be designed for people and have the safety of residents at their heart. I am all for beauty and aesthetics, but as the good book so aptly puts it, man looks on the outward appearance but God looks at the heart. The outside might be the first thing that people see, but the important thing is what the structure is below the outer core, and we are here today to see what is happening down below.

The dangers of constructing substandard buildings were tragically demonstrated in Grenfell last year. The fact that the aesthetics that were put in place to pretty the building up made the danger much worse makes it clear that we must have stricter controls in place to ensure that the frame and design is not compromised or scrimped on for any reason. Although we understand that the aim of fitting exterior cladding was to increase the lifespan of the tower blocks and improve their thermal efficiency, it also provides a protective outer skin to protect them from the elements. However, the results of that have been horrendous—that is a fact—and we must find another way of elongating the lifespan of the building and better insulation.

Such cladding appears to have health ramifications, with numerous examples of residents experiencing the stress and anxiety of living in dangerous accommodation—some Members have referred to that—and facing the financial burden that that has the potential to impose
on them. All those issues, aside from the cladding, need to be taken on board. A key recommendation by the all-party group for healthy homes and buildings—I look to the Minister for his response, please—was that the Government commit to making housing and building renovation a central infrastructure priority and develop plans for retrofitting the current housing stock that take a holistic approach to maximising health and wellbeing. Events such as those that took place on 14 June demonstrate the need for the UK Government to get behind and back such a scheme.

In Northern Ireland, an independent report suggested that social housing, or local housing authorities as they are called here, must consider installing sprinkler systems in tower blocks. Again, I look to the Minister. The report concluded that the housing body’s four Belfast tower blocks that have cladding are safe and comply with regulations, but that there were some contraventions that hamper smoke extraction and ventilation. Automatic fire suppression systems such as sprinklers are mandatory for high-rise residential buildings in Scotland and Wales, but not in England and Northern Ireland. That must change. I look to Northern Ireland to make the changes as much as I look to England to make the same changes.

A terrible tragedy occurred, and I do not want to see anything similar on the shores of Northern Ireland. The report carried out by the University of Ulster on social housing also noted November’s blaze at the 14-storey Coolmoyne House in Dumnurry, outside Belfast, where four people were treated by paramedics, and indicates that communications with tower block residents must be improved. I look to the Minister to make sure that that happens.

3.12 pm

Mr Tammanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on securing this important debate. Like him, I have in my constituency of Slough a residential building with aluminium cladding material. The building is called Nova House, a privately-owned seven-storey block of 68 flats in the town centre. Post the Grenfell horror, in the summer of 2017, that aluminium composite material cladding failed two of the tests conducted at the BRE on behalf of the Department for Communities and Local Government. In August last year, the Secretary of State wrote to all local authority chief executives about residential tower blocks with ACM cladding, telling them to take active steps and stating:

“If private sector building owners do not comply with your requests, I will look at what further action can be taken to support you in carrying out your responsibilities.”

To protect the safety of residents, Slough Borough Council has spent half a million pounds in making the building safe and funding a qualified and staffed fire vehicle at the building 24/7. The council’s work has avoided the need for the evacuation of the building. Further, Slough Borough Council developed an ambitious plan to take ownership of the block’s freehold company, which will allow it to ensure the cladding is removed quickly and to carry out other critical safety work without delay.

Such a move by a local authority is without precedent, and I am sure the Minister will join me in commending Slough Borough Council for its commitment to the safety of constituents. The council has not hesitated to act. Now I want to see the support promised by the Secretary of State. That should include contributing towards the costs incurred in protecting the safety of residents, rather than those extraordinary costs falling on the local council tax payer.

What would have assisted the council is the disclosure of documents from the building control inspector. However, approved inspectors are not required to provide anyone other than their client with copies of approvals or the reasoning behind them. What happens where a client no longer exists? Such documents might never be made available. Information in those documents might be critical for safety. Local authorities and other agencies should surely have sight of everything they need to protect residents. Will the Minister therefore introduce measures to ensure that critical safety information in relation to privately owned buildings is shared with local authorities carrying out their responsibilities?

In the meantime, what support and advice will the Minister give to local authorities when they need to secure vital documents? Will the Department write to building control inspectors and stress the importance of liaising with local authorities? In addition to the cladding, survey work has established that there are other serious deficiencies outside Nova House, calling into question whether it met building regulations when it was converted.

The Minister knows that wider concerns about the current system of building control have been raised by the Local Government Association, which might be a hindrance to effective inspection. The LGA warned that pressure to lower costs can lower standards and lead to fewer, less rigorous inspections. Will the Minister now commit to a review of the system of approved inspectors for building control checks, including the control and supervision of them, as well as the quality of their work?

Finally, building and fire safety are crucial for public safety and go to the heart of the purpose of Government. An increase in the effectiveness and quality of inspection regimes is crucial. Again, I commend Slough Borough Council for its proactive and innovative stance. Now let us see the support promised by the Secretary of State.

3.16 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) for securing this important debate. I will be brief. Lots of people have said things that I agree with, so I will not repeat them.

The cladding situation is deeply concerning. Remediation work is very limited, and where it is occurring it is failing the tenants involved. The Grenfell Tower fire happened on 14 June. Nearly nine months later, if anyone is listening, of the 314 buildings installed with ACM cladding that we know of, only 13 meet building regulations guidance. That presents fire hazards in 301 buildings more than 18 metres high. As Labour’s shadow fire Minister, I have spoken with the Fire Brigades Union and it has advised me that had that tragedy occurred outside central London, it might have been much worse owing to a lack of resources. I hope the Minister is listening to me, because that paints a worrying picture.

For all the sympathetic noises, the Government’s inaction is clear. The tragic fire at Grenfell has not pushed the Department into action. I find the pace of
the Government’s action extremely questionable, as do other people. At the heart of the matter is the Government’s complete lack of direction. Ensuring the public’s safety would undermine their austerity project and be averse to their cuts in every other sector. I urge movement on this issue as it is their moral duty to demonstrate clear leadership and ensure the matter is resolved in the interests of tenants’ safety.

I went to Grenfell last June and laid flowers. I went on the silent vigil last month. The last thing that people see when they get to the end of the march is the tower — a truly shocking and haunting sight. For the sake of those who died in the fire and for the people left in the area who have to get up every morning and look at that tower, it is the Government’s duty to act now.

3.18 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): We all certainly felt the terrible tragedy at Grenfell. I remember waking up, watching the television and seeing the appalling conditions. I have not been to visit the tower, but I have seen it from a distance and it is an appalling sight. I certainly agree with the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) about that.

Many Members have rightly spoken about local authority properties, but I want to raise the issue of leaseholders. In my constituency, just over two years ago, Premier House was converted from commercial to residential with 121 flats. We all know what it is like to raise the money for a mortgage and stamp duty, and in the first few months or years money is often quite tight, so I was shocked to find that at the beginning of January this year the people who had just moved into those properties were told that the service charge in the block had doubled from £2,200 a year to £4,200 a year because the property was converted.

In addition, the managing company is also hiring four fire marshals to patrol that building constantly. That is causing my constituents huge concern. Many are self-employed or have only just got a mortgage. Some are one-parent families and are struggling to keep up with their payments. A lot of them have formed an action group and want to take the matter to a first-tier tribunal. The problem is that, if the tribunal rules in favour of the freeholder, residents will be forced to pursue their solicitors and surveyors on the question of what the problem was with the building. Ultimately, if they refuse to pay the service charge or fall into arrears, the freeholder can take the property back.

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I sympathise with those in local authority housing, but those in the private sector, equally, face a difficult situation, which I want to bring to the Minister’s attention.

3.20 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on bringing the debate to the House, and on all the work he has done in his constituency. His constituents are lucky to have him fighting their corner; I am sure they know that.

I will mention once again Stormzy’s intervention at this year’s Brit Awards, which secured headlines not just because of his profile, but because he articulated how the British people feel about many of the issues that have been discussed today and how, nine months on, as many hon. Members have said, many questions remain unanswered and the victims of Grenfell have not received justice.

I want to talk about a case study in the Borough of Camden in my constituency. It relates to the human experience at the heart of the cladding question and the enormous financial burden being placed on local authorities in dealing with the matter. Many hon. Members will know that Camden Council took the urgent decision to evacuate more than 3,000 people from the Chalcots estate following tests on cladding. The tragedy at Grenfell prompted the tests, but it was the London fire brigade that ordered immediate evacuations following an assessment. The evacuation was carried out throughout the night, and has caused serious distress to residents. The upheaval of decamping to a hotel for several weeks was difficult enough, but cladding removal during the bitter cold of winter was even more difficult. Many residents’ heating systems are not strong enough to heat their homes, now that they are so exposed.

I raise those experiences to underline the need for action on building regulations, but also to stress the trauma that my constituents on the estate have experienced owing to cladding replacement. They live with cold and with seemingly endless construction. Compensation is missing, and there is a 24-hour security presence months after buildings were declared fit for purpose. That is not a normal way to live, but it has been the reality facing nearly 3,000 of my constituents since July 2017. I am speaking on their behalf today.

Replacement is a protracted process. According to a recent Camden housing scrutiny report, the new cladding will not be fully fitted across the estates until August next year, so it is not hard to understand why councils are begging for the kind of political will that would confront contractors and create a clearer set of standards on fire safety practices.

Good financial management means that Camden has taken on the costs without cutting frontline services. I commend its decision to stop payments to the company that put up the flammable cladding on the Chalcots and endangered residents’ lives. Camden hopes to spend the millions of pounds saved from abandoning the previous contract on safer cladding. The operation has cost more than £50 million and breaks down as £12 million for evacuation and safety management, including fire marshals; £9 million on repairs, including emergency repairs and doors; £10 million on cladding removal; and £22 million on cladding replacement. However, as my local newspaper, the Camden New Journal, put it, the council should not have had to do that. Had the Government kept their promise after the inferno at Grenfell, the council would not have had to drain its reserves and foot the bill.

At the heart of the debate is the question of how we make our constituents feel safe in their own homes. Replacing combustible cladding is an obvious and immediate place to start, but so too is addressing the reduced resources of the emergency services and local authorities. In the days following the Grenfell disaster, many promises were made about rehousing vulnerable residents and recouping the cost of new cladding, but that has not been the experience in my constituency. It is possible that the promise made by the Government has been forgotten, but proactive campaigners, MPs and councillors will not let it drop.
Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): The Scottish National party spokesman has graciously given us a few extra minutes, for which I am grateful.

3.24 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on his speech and on securing the debate. I welcome the contributions that have been made so far. Many thousands of residents face huge legal fees and potentially thousands of pounds of costs to remove ACM cladding from their buildings. Freeholders, developers and insurers will not take responsibility, nor will the Government. We are here today because the buck stops with the Government to sort the mess out.

In my constituency, there is a block of flats built nine years ago with ACM cladding. At least, we are as sure of that as we can be; residents were told that one set of cladding was ACM, and then that another set was ACM. They have been confused and let down from the start. The cladding needs to be replaced. There is a 24-hour waking watch, but residents are understandably nervous and of course anyone who wants to sell their flat clearly has no hope of doing that. The freeholder—Wallace Estates—has washed its hands of responsibility. The director told me in a letter that “it is the case that the building is now deemed to be unsafe because of a belated recognition by those in authority that the standards governing building safety at the time of the development were inadequate” and that those with “responsibility for setting the standards should be liable”.

The developers, Durkin, have also washed their hands. I wrote to them but have not received a reply. They rang my office—I am not sure, but perhaps they were being careful not to put anything in writing—and said they had not done anything wrong. The insurers, NHBC, are considering the claim, but it has been with them for months and nothing has been forthcoming.

The Minister, in a letter to me today, has also washed his hands of responsibility, saying: “I am clear that the morally right thing for building owners to do is take responsibility for meeting the costs of remediation and interim safety measures”. So my constituents, living in an unsafe block, are left to sit in it and pay the bill for the cladding removal and replacement. They have already been asked to pay thousands of pounds and have been told that they will face a bill for thousands more. They are having to club together to pay legal bills. They have all the tea and knowing, with NHBC, are claiming the cost, but it has been with them for months and nothing has been forthcoming.

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There are big policy questions: how can Government let the legal system take over when their own testing process has been shown to be insufficient? If leaseholders are found liable, are the Government really content that residents should be made homeless—something the LGA has warned about? What about desktop studies? They have already been mentioned, so I will not go into detail.

I want briefly to suggest some things that the Minister might this afternoon commit to doing. Will he meet my constituents to learn about the pressures they face? Will he start a proper dialogue with freeholders? I thank him for his response to my letter and his agreement to arrange a phone call with Wallace Estates. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North that the Government should take the lead, but if they feel that the moral responsibility sits with landlords, they have to act to ensure that action is taken on behalf of residents.

The Government should sit down with insurers to find out what is going on. There are many claims in play, and that is leading to months of uncertainty and legal wrangling, which does not help anyone.

The Government should look at ownership rules for property. As the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) said, there should be no more hiding behind offshore entities. One of the problems that we have had is working out who owns buildings and freeholds. There are shell companies and offshore companies that are impenetrable. Details cannot be obtained from the website. It is complicated to get through to them.

The Prime Minister yesterday addressed the issue of land banking, opening up the possibility that developers who sit on land might face restrictions in getting planning permissions. Will the Minister take a similar approach to developers, stopping planning permission being given to them if they sit on their hands and leave dangerous cladding in place?

The buck stops with the Government. If they believe that other people are responsible, they have to make sure action is taken. My constituents, who are the least able to pay and the least to blame, are in the firing line. The Minister must surely accept that that is not fair.

3.29 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on securing this timely debate and on his wider efforts to co-ordinate Members who are concerned that the Government should step up and do more. Two hundred and sixty-four days have now passed since we watched flames engulf the Grenfell tower block in north Kensington, yet on private freehold developments across the country hundreds of thousands of residents still live with the knowledge that their homes are covered in lethal material. New Capital Quay, a vast 980-home development in my constituency, is only one of hundreds of such cases, although it is perhaps the highest-profile.

Cladding on the site failed tests carried out by the Department in July last year, and eight months on that cladding and insulation remain in place with no timescale for their removal and replacement, and with an inadequate and expensive waking watch fire safety patrol still in place. Residents are left in limbo while the freeholder, Galliard Homes, and the National House Building Council mullet over whether there was a breach of building regulations at the time of construction, and about who is liable—this tussle might be settled out of court, but it might ultimately be resolved only through lengthy litigation.

Residents stuck in the middle of that messy squabble are terrified at the thought that their families are not safe, and leaseholders are anxious that they will be hit by the full costs of the work. At a public meeting last week, one elderly resident told me that she is resigned to the fact that she will not make it out of the building if there is a fire, even with the waking watch in place.
What has been the Government’s position throughout? It has amounted to little more than a muffled and infrequent plea to the private companies involved not to pass on costs to leaseholders. No attempt has been made to ensure that the dangerous cladding is removed as a matter of urgency. In many ways, however, that is no surprise because the Government are deeply compromised on fire safety. In 2013, they failed to act on recommendations made after the 2009 Lakanal House disaster, and they chose not to rewrite procedural guidance set out in Approved Document B. They did nothing to prevent the installation of combustible polyethylene ACM cladding of the type found on New Capital Quay.

Presumably on the basis of advice from the BRE Group, in 2006 the Government opened the door to combustible insulation material such as the K15 Kingspan insulation found on New Capital Quay. That was approved as compliant through testing, when previously it had been impossible to meet the guidance by that route.

The Building Control Alliance determined to introduce a new route to compliance through desktop studies, but as the market became increasingly competitive its members began to approve cladding without even the need for such a desktop study. It is hard to believe that the Government were not aware that that was taking place, yet they failed to amend Approved Document B to respond to it.

If one steps back from all the legal wrangling between private companies about cladding and insulation on private freehold developments, one notes the flawed nature of the building regulations regime, the inadequacy of procedural guidance within that regime, and the passive response of Government to the behaviour of the combustibles industry since 2014. That explains why dangerous, combustible cladding and insulation of the kind that surrounds the homes of my constituents were signed off as compliant.

Let me be clear: the fault does not lie only with Conservative Governments since 2010, because successive Governments have failed to ensure that the building regulation regime was fit for purpose. However, the Government have a duty to act—if not a legal duty, then certainly a moral one—and they can do so speedily in a way that will make a big difference to my constituents by issuing clear, prescriptive advice about the final date by which dangerous combustible cladding must be removed from developments such as New Capital Quay. That is the least my constituents, and others across the country in a similar situation, deserve.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): I thank all hon. Members for collaborating on timing.

3.33 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter, in this well-attended and well-informed debate. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) for securing it, and for his clear and detailed summary of the situation. The statistic that he mentioned of one fire every month is alarming, and it certainly focuses the mind.

It is essential that everyone has a safe, warm and affordable home, but following the tragedy at Grenfell last year, many uncertainties remain about how safe properties throughout the country actually are. Building and fire safety are critical components of public safety, not just in residential flats but in hotels, student accommodation and even hospitals—indeed, anywhere someone may be staying. It is concerning that so far only a fraction of that cladding known to be unsafe has been replaced throughout the country, and questions still remain about which materials are safe to use. The issue of flammable or combustible cladding must be clarified and, in my opinion, its use should be prohibited.

Further questions about who should pay—this is particularly an issue in privately owned blocks, where costs could be passed on to leaseholders—are alarming. That is not so much an issue in Scotland because the Abolition of Feudal Tenant etc (Scotland) Act 2000 and the Tenements (Scotland) Act 2004 effectively brought the last vestiges of leasehold to an end. However, the problem of owners being financially trapped in buildings affected by these issues does apply, and that has been further complicated by changes over the years to building regulations, and by responsible reconsiderations about the retrospective materials used. What may have been deemed acceptable in the past might not be now.

I represent a constituency that has no high-rise domestic buildings. Nevertheless, following the Grenfell tragedy there was considerable anxiety among many constituents living in lower level multi-storey flatted accommodation. I am grateful to both local authorities in my area—Falkirk and West Lothian—for reviewing the fire safety arrangements after Grenfell, and for confirming that all council properties have appropriate fire safety arrangements in place, including both annual and five-yearly fire safety assessments. There are issues in other parts of Scotland. For example, Glasgow City Council has identified two buildings where PE ACM has been used.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Some Glasgow Harbour flats in my constituency have ACM cladding. The residents have no recourse with builders or insurance companies, and they have to pay for fire wardens. They now face enormous bills for replacement of the cladding. With no one claiming responsibility, does my hon. Friend agree that residents should be receiving financial support for this remedial building work?

Martyn Day: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend—the issue of who pays has been raised yet again.

In Scotland, since 2005 building regulations have required all new build high-rise domestic buildings to be fitted with sprinklers. In January, Labour MSP David Stewart proposed a Member’s Bill that aims to make the installation of sprinklers mandatory for all new build social housing. The consultation document also considers the retrofit of sprinklers to social high-rise blocks. In September last year the BBC broadcast a programme that stated how out of 15 fatalities and 480 injuries in high-rise fires in Scotland since 2009, only one of those casualties occurred in a flat fitted with a sprinkler system. That is a significant statistic, although sprinklers are only one of a number of fire safety measures that may or may not be installed in any particular building.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has commissioned research into a targeted approach to fire safety, based on a detailed analysis of Scottish fire deaths and serious injuries between 2013 and 2016. That research will include a forensic assessment of whether residential sprinklers
would have been effective in preventing death or injury. The outcomes of that research will help to inform future Scottish Government and Scottish Fire and Rescue Service policy, and to reduce fire deaths and injuries in the future.

This issue does not just affect residential buildings. The Queen Elizabeth University Hospital and the Royal Hospital for Children in Glasgow will have a small amount of cladding panels removed and replaced at a cost of £6 million. That work will be completed early next year, and the Scottish Government have committed to pay for it.

In conclusion, many issues of fire safety guidance have been raised from Members across the House. I was particularly interested in the point raised by the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) about the possibility of excluding VAT from remedial works. I would support such a measure, and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

3.37 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter, and the fact that you managed to allow 19 people to contribute to this debate is significant. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed). He spoke only briefly today, but I know the assiduous work that he has put into this issue over a long time. His constituents should be proud of what he is trying to achieve. This has been a rightly challenging debate, and I hope that the Minister will take that on board. He is relatively new to the position, but years—it could be years before we get resolution. We cannot wait for some sedentary legal process; we need action to determine where the responsibility lies.

Many years ago we had a major fire in Manchester—the Woolworths fire—and those of us of an older disposition, like myself, remember it well. People died and as a result the law was changed and polyurethane foam was banned for use in domestic furniture. We must be prepared to be radical if we are to make our safety case. My hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) made a point about fire marshals. It is good towards the longer term, which is about ensuring that those buildings are safe from fire as far as is humanly possible. That will mean the removal of existing cladding where that is inappropriate, and its replacement with more suitable materials.

I want to begin by talking about the question of responsibility, which has engaged Members from all parts of the Chamber. It is important to say that leaseholders cannot seriously be expected to foot these enormous bills. I think it was my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Andy Slaughter) who quoted from the Minister’s letter, which used words identical to those of the Secretary of State in a letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North. I say this kindly to the Minister, but it is not enough to write that “I believe that the morally right thing is for the building owner to take responsibility for meeting the cost of remediation”.

The Minister is a lawyer, so he will know that moral rectitude will not stand up in court or pay the leaseholders’ bills. I am not sure whether this still applies, but in the early moments of the situation with Citiscape, the freeholder was saying to leaseholders that unless they were prepared individually and collectively to agree to pay for the remedial works, no remedial work would take place. That is not moral responsibility; that is an outrage. We collectively have to do something about it.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): On this issue of moral and legal responsibility, does the hon. Gentleman agree that we can learn lessons from the private rented sector? It has taken legal measures to force landlords to bring properties up to basic safety standards, with fire alarms and improved insulation for energy-poor households. Does he agree that in this matter, moral responsibility will not work? Legislation from the Government is needed to sort the problem out.

Tony Lloyd: I hope the Minister is listening, because that demand is coming from all parts of the House. At this level, the matter is not party political; we have a recognition that we need the Government to act as the Government. They are the only responsible agency that can begin to show the determination.

We cannot wait for the courts. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North said that the property managers had referred the Citiscape case to the first-tier tribunal, but as a lawyer the Minister knows that the matter could be with the courts not for weeks and months, but years—it could be years before we get resolution. We cannot wait for some sedentary legal process; we need action to determine where the responsibility lies.

I have great sympathy with the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) made: that it is unreasonable for social landlords, whether they are local authorities or housing associations, to have to pick up the tab. That would mean we were saying to a subset of British society—tenants of a particular landlord—that they will pay for the cost of remediation, when the responsibility does not lie with the tenants or the social landlords any more than it lies with the leaseholders.

Importantly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich said, the responsibility comes back to failures of Governments of all descriptions. The reality is that the failure is recognisable here and now, and the responsibility has to be picked up here and now. It is incumbent on the Government to ensure that the matter is resolved. It is not about moral responsibility, but practical action that says to leaseholders, “You will not have to face bills of £40,000-plus.” That is what the amount is in some cases, and frankly people cannot afford that.

Has the Minister had any contact with the insurance industry? That is not about the responsibility for paying for the work that needs to be done, but about whether it will be prepared to insure buildings in the longer term. It would be significant if the insurance industry walked away from insuring buildings that we know have difficulties. We have to sort out the question of responsibility. In the end, that falls on the Government because of the past failure of the regulatory system.

We need to look at some of the wider issues that have emerged. This month the Peabody Trust found that one of the cladding materials it was using to replace the Grenfell tower cladding—Xtratherm—is no longer an acceptable material, as it is flammable. Peabody faces
the bizarre situation of having to remove things that it used to replace what it had already removed. Who picks up the consequences of that? In the end, we have got to give people living in our tower blocks some certainty that their homes are safe, and that brings us to the question of how quickly we will see removal and replacement. Fire marshals are useful, but removal and replacement has to be part of where we move to.

Do we now have absolute accuracy about which materials are potentially affected? Do we have absolute accuracy about the number of tower blocks that may be affected across the country? That basic information will determine whether we can move forward. I may be wrong, but I am not certain that the Ministry has knowledge of all the private buildings out there that may be affected. That is a significant challenge. It means that people are living in blocks and do not know that they may be affected. Indeed, there may be private owners who do not know that their property is affected.

We have got to begin to go beyond the question of the building regulations and bringing them up to standard. A report said:

"Advice from the independent expert advisory panel set up to ensure buildings are safe and published by MHCLG in December 2017 tells building owners they can still rely on desktop assessments."

It is not enough for the Ministry to say that to the world. Desktop assessments are only credible in this country; I understand that they would not be allowed anywhere else in Europe. Also, the building regulations are only advisory. We cannot have a situation where people can pick and choose which bits of the regulations they apply.

We have to move on to something that takes us away from the failures of the past. As some of my hon. Friends have said, we need transparency about what has happened to know what the technical specifications should be. We need to ensure that we do not have this conflict where the Building Research Establishment is taking money from its clients to be part of the testing process. We have got to ensure that the regulations are fit and proper for the future.

This has been an important debate. When we look to the longer term, the question of cost arises. A number of Members—I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North raised this issue with the Secretary of State—have asked whether the cost could be removed from recladding. While there may be legal issues around European legislation, the Government can get around that by simply putting that 20% back into the pot where remedial work is taking place. Government can do that.

I come back to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) made. When the Government can return hundreds of millions of pounds to the Exchequer, the money is there to do this kind of remedial work. We owe it not simply to those who died in Grenfell tower, but to all those living in tower blocks to say that the time has come for the Government to act. Only the Government can act. We look to the Minister to say now how they will act.

3.48 pm

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) for securing this debate and speaking powerfully about the situation his constituents find themselves in. I am very grateful for the contributions of Members from all parts of the House. I will try to address as many of them as possible in the limited time available.

Before I address squarely the issues facing residents in Croydon and people in other residential buildings we have heard about today that have rightly been raised, I want to give a little bit of wider context. The fire at Grenfell Tower was a terrible tragedy—a tragedy that should not happen in 21st-century London or anywhere in this country. The Government are committed to learning the lessons from Grenfell and ensuring that nothing like that can ever happen again. Like the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), I have been down there and seen the devastation. I have talked to residents of the Lancaster West estate. I am personally committed to learning the lessons.

Immediately after the fire, the Department set up a building safety programme with the aim of ensuring that all high-rise residential buildings are safe from the threat of fire and crucially, as Members have rightly said, that residents can feel safe and can rest assured in their homes. To support that, the Secretary of State appointed an expert panel to ensure that the necessary steps are taken to ensure the safety of residents of high-rise buildings. We have consistently relied on that expert advice, because the issue of public safety is central to what we need to achieve.

Through screening tests, we swiftly identified social housing blocks and public buildings with unsafe cladding. Working with the expert panel, the Government provided advice to building owners on the interim measures that they should put in place to ensure the safety of their residents. Of course, that depends on the individual property, as hon. Members have rightly said, but interim measures can include warden systems, measures to prevent the spread of fire to or from car parks, and all sorts of other things. All the affected social sector buildings that have been identified have those measures in place. We are confident that that addresses the immediate issue of safety for residents. I do not think that that should be elided or confused with the wider remediation efforts that, quite rightly, also need to take place. We can give that assurance to residents.

At the same time, we tested different combinations of cladding and insulation to see which met the building regulations guidance. We published consolidated advice last autumn confirming the results of those tests, with advice for building owners, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) discussed. Since then, we have been working with building owners and the industry to support remediation work. The hon. Gentleman suggested that the Government have not provided clear guidance on the materials for remediation. Actually, the expert panel published advice on 5 September, and further advice was published in December, including an information note for building owners. The Building Research Establishment has also published a catalogue of past BS 8414 tests to assist building owners choosing compliant materials. I hope that that gives the hon. Gentleman some reassurance.

We have been working with local authorities to help them identify private residential buildings with similar cladding, and to ensure that they, too, are made safe. At the same time, as hon. Members know, we have asked Dame Judith Hackitt to undertake an independent
review of building regulations and fire safety, to ensure that buildings are safe in the future, in recognition of the clear flaws that have been discovered in relation to the previous system. We welcomed her interim report, which was published in December, and have committed to implementing all her recommendations.

The suggestion that we are sitting on our hands, that we have not looked at this matter soberly, properly and carefully, or that we are not taking action is quite wrong, as the action in relation to Dame Judith’s review illustrates. We look forward to the publication of the final report later in the spring. Obviously it is a detailed piece of work, which needs to be done carefully and properly.

The hon. Members for Croydon North and for Hammersmith asked about the role of desktop studies. We will consult on that shortly in response to the recommendations from the Hackitt review, so we are already taking some of the findings forward. The hon. Members for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) and for Croydon North mentioned the tragic Lakanal House fire in Camberwell in 2009. Just for the record, and as a matter of balance in today’s debate, it is right to point out that the shadow Housing Minister, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), refused extra funding for fire safety measures when he was the Housing Minister, because he did not deem them necessary. I am not saying that to score political points. [ Interruption. ] I am making the argument—

**Marsha De Cordova:** Why would you say it, then?

**Dominic Raab:** I am saying it for balance. Any hon. Member in the post of Minister would look at the matter carefully and responsibly, and take the expert advice. That is what the right hon. Gentleman did, and that is what we have done.

Let me turn to some of the specific points that have been raised today, starting with the identification of buildings with unsafe cladding. We believe that we have identified all affected social housing blocks and public buildings, and interim measures are in place as and where necessary, suitable to the individual buildings, as I have described. With regard to private sector buildings, the Government made the testing facility at the Building Research Establishment available free of charge. We continue to urge all building owners to submit samples for testing if they think that there is any reason to believe that they may be unsafe because of cladding.

In addition, the Secretary of State wrote to local authorities in August asking them to identify privately owned buildings with potentially unsafe cladding. It is their statutory responsibility to do so. The majority of local authorities recognised the urgency of that work, and provided relevant information. We are very grateful for all their hard work, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who talked about some of the good work that has been done by his local authority.

This is not a straightforward task. We have been in continual dialogue with local authorities ever since that point. The collaboration is close and constant, and it continues. In fact, an event is taking place a few hundred yards from here as we speak, bringing together the Ministry and its experts, local authorities, officials and the fire and rescue service to discuss best practice.

In response to the question asked by the hon. Members for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and for Slough, just last week we announced a financial support package of £1 million to assist the most affected local authorities in identifying private high-rise buildings with potentially unsafe cladding. We are also looking at the statutory guidance and the statutory operating directions for local authorities in their relationship with those private sector building owners. Those measures will reinforce local authorities in carrying out that work. I assure hon. Members that as soon as we are notified of buildings with potentially unsafe cladding, we will work with the owners and the relevant fire and rescue service to ensure that those interim measures are put in place.

**Emma Dent Coad:** Will the Minister give way?

**Dominic Raab:** I will make a bit more progress, given the time available, and the need to allow the hon. Member for Croydon North a bit of time to wind up. Our No. 1 priority is the safety of residents, and the interim measures ensure that that is the case.

**Emma Dent Coad:** On that point, will the Minister give way?

**Dominic Raab:** I want to address not just the points that the hon. Lady has made, but those made by all hon. Members in the debate.

The Government have been very clear that the remediation should be done as swiftly as possible, but it must be done properly—precisely because we are talking about the long-term public safety of residents. Let us be clear: the remediation of buildings with aluminium composite material cladding is a complex process. It involves major construction work that needs to be planned, consulted on, and carried out professionally and carefully.

Planning alone can take up to a year. It is not just a case of ripping down the cladding then deciding what to do next. I am encouraged that remediation is already under way in 58% of affected social housing buildings, and that seven have finished their remediation work already. Clearly, there is a long way to go, but that is significant progress. At least one or two hon. Members in today’s debate seemed to be blithe about the work that is under way, how difficult it is, and how important it is to do it properly.

Let me turn to the issue of funding.

**Emma Dent Coad:** Will the Minister give way?

**Dominic Raab:** I am not going to; I will address the direct questions asked by the hon. Member for Croydon North and others about funding. In the social sector, all the local authorities and housing associations that we have spoken to have indicated that they are choosing not to pass on the costs of essential remediation to individual flat owners within their buildings. We will also consider financial flexibilities for local authorities to fund essential fire safety works to buildings that they own. We have not yet declined a single request. We are taking this very seriously, and have engaged in protracted dialogue with those people who have come to us.

In the private sector, of course, the allocation of responsibility depends on the terms of the leasehold arrangements, as qualified by general law. The determination of the legal position will obviously need to be settled
ultimately by a court. Proceedings are under way in the
correspondence of the hon. Member for Croydon North,
as I am sure he knows. I took the point that my hon.
Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) made: that
it cannot be right for a Minister to pre-empt or prejudge
the legal determination of a relationship, where it is not
only spelled out in the leasehold arrangement, but
qualified by general law.

In some cases, the costs fall, in practice, to landlords
or building owners; it may be clearer in some leases
than in others. Where the costs do not fall to landlords
or building owners as a matter of strict law, we continue
to urge those with responsibility to follow the lead of
the social sector. We urge those private companies to do
the right thing, and not to attempt to pass the costs on
to residents. They can meet some of those costs—hon.
Members asked about this—through alternative routes
such as insurance claims, warranties or legal action. It is
rightly for them to pursue those avenues. They have the
financial means, the relationship—legal or otherwise—and
the wherewithal to do so. The Secretary of State and I
have been clear about that in direct conversations, including
with those who own the property in the constituency of
the hon. Member for Croydon North. Where building
owners are seeking to pass on remediation costs to
leaseholders, it is important that leaseholders are able
to get specialist advice. The Government have provided
free legal advice and support through a range of measures,
including the Leasehold Advisory Service, or LEASE—a
free and tailored service.

In the time available, I hope that I have illustrated not
just the complexity of the challenge that we face across
the private and social sectors, but the Government’s
concerted effort to deal with the immediate issue of
public safety and to ensure that the allocation of
responsibility sits in the right place, which in our view is
with the building owners.

3.59 pm

Mr Reed: I am grateful to everybody who has taken
part in today’s debate and provided such powerful
testimonial from across the country. The Minister seems
to be heavily relying on the expert panel that he mentioned,
but that panel is chaired by the man who signed off the
kind of cladding on Grenfell as safe—I have the document
that shows it here, and will give it to the Minister
afterwards. I wonder whether he should question a little
more, rather than just listen to the advice that he is
receiving.

The industry is still very confused about what it needs
to do when this kind of cladding is found on buildings.
The Department needs to issue clearer advice. Finally,
we bailed out the banks when they broke the banking
system. Why can we not bail out leaseholders, who are
innocent victims of the Government’s failed, flawed fire
safety regime?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered cladding and remedial fire
safety work.

NHS Wholly Owned Subsidiary Companies

Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair

4 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered wholly-owned subsidiary companies
in the NHS.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship,
Mr Hollobone. I am glad to have secured this brief debate on the issue of wholly owned subsidiaries,
and this fairly recent but rapidly developing situation
spreading across the NHS. What are these companies?
They are organisations set up by NHS trusts as subsidiary
companies to the trust, into which a range of NHS
facilities management staff are transferred. When I say
capital facilities management staff, I mean all the porters,
cleaners, catering staff, estates and maintenance staff,
and others who keep our hospitals going. Those staff
are an essential part of the NHS.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York
Teaching Hospital is about to enter into an alternative
management company for the facility staff there. Those
are staff that want to work for the NHS, not least
because they get the benefit of NHS terms and conditions
and pensions. Does my hon. Friend agree that the
loopholes in the taxation of the NHS need to be addressed
so that those people can remain working for the NHS?

Liz Twist: I most certainly do agree with my hon.
Friend. We know that NHS trusts are under incredible
financial pressure and are looking for ways to stretch
the available funds. Some trusts have seen wholly owned
subsidiaries as a way of reducing costs. Those trusts
include the Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust,
which provides excellent hospital services to many of
my constituents.

The cost savings come about in two main ways:
through saving VAT and by saving on staffing costs. For
some, there may be a third area of income—advising
other NHS trusts on going down the same path, which
is one of the reasons why they are spreading across the
country. In November 2017, the then Health Minister,
the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), stated that:
“NHS Improvement is aware of 39 subsidiaries consolidated
within the accounts of foundation trusts”—[Official Report,
14 November 2017; Vol. 631, c. 129.]

We know that more are being created even now.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The issue of pensions
is very much at the forefront of the minds of myself and
others in this House. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is
essential that staff working through the front door of
the NHS or the back door of the wholly owned subsidiary
company must be entitled to retain their NHS pension?
Any attack on the pension scheme must be wholly
rejected and the trusts must all be made to understand
the position on pensions when these types of actions
are taking place.

Liz Twist: I most certainly do agree, not just for
pensions but also for terms and conditions.

What is the problem with these companies? First, it is
that they come at a price, which for the most part is met
by the staff who work for them. Secondly, the VAT saved
by trusts with these companies is not new money coming
into the NHS—the money that trusts save will be lost
elsewhere in public services. Already, the Department of Health and Social Care has reminded trusts by letter that they should not engage in any activities that may be construed as tax avoidance, and the loophole could be closed in the future. Thirdly, the establishment of wholly owned subsidiaries leaves the services open to privatisation in the future, continuing the fragmentation of our NHS.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The North Tees and Hartlepool NHS trust set up a limited liability partnership last week. Even according to its own published material, it provides no guarantee of job protection beyond a few months and will create a situation with different employees on very different terms and conditions. Is this not all about Government cuts? Does my hon. Friend agree that we could see even more staff transferred into this sort of arrangement in order to meet the Government’s cuts agenda?

Liz Twist: I most certainly do agree. I think this is the start of a very worrying process, not just for facilities management stuff but potentially for other staff.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being very generous in taking interventions. Unite points out that over the past five years, more for-profit companies have won contracts to run NHS services, with the total value of contracts awarded in 2016-17 standing at a staggering £3.1 billion. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must compel Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to close this tax loophole, so that NHS trusts are not forced to consider outsourcing NHS services?

Liz Twist: I most certainly agree that the issue is a dangerous one that needs to be looked at, and it is a very worrying one because, whatever happens, the staff who have transferred are in a very difficult position.

In the longer term, the establishment of the wholly owned subsidiaries leaves services open to privatisation in the future, continuing the fragmentation of our NHS, which is not in the long-term interests of all who use the NHS. There is no evidence that the plans will improve efficiency or productivity in the NHS. They exploit a tax loophole and seek to exploit the future workforce.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Lady and her colleagues are right to highlight the fact that the financial pressure on the NHS is the main driver for this situation. Does she agree that it is very difficult in some services to differentiate between administrators and back-office services, and frontline services? Sometimes, administrators and back-office workers are embedded in clinical teams, and this actually worsens fragmentation and makes it much more difficult to deliver high-quality patient care.

Liz Twist: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. NHS staff, whatever their job, are all part of a team that delivers a service, and they all work together. For example, the catering and cleaning staff who looked after my mum’s hospital ward when she was in hospital recently were also a part of the NHS caring process. I think that is a really important point.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): One of the major problems with the creation of these wholly owned companies is that they lead to a two-tier workforce in which often the lowest paid staff, such as domestics and security guards, are on worse terms and conditions than other staff. Does my hon. Friend agree that that represents a race to the bottom and is not just bad for those moved over to the new companies but bad for the NHS overall?

Liz Twist: I most certainly do agree, and I will expand on that point shortly.

I want to speak about the impact on staff—some of the same staff we have all been praising in recent days for turning up to work in the snow and coping when we have the only too frequent crises. They are an integral part of the NHS team, as the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) said, making it possible for nursing and medical staff and other allied health professionals to do their bit in caring for patients.

On transfer to a wholly owned subsidiary company, staff already employed by the trust will be transferred on their existing terms and conditions. That is, on “Agenda for Change” terms and conditions and pay rates, negotiated nationally and checked to ensure equal pay for work of equal value. They will retain their membership of the NHS pension scheme and a set of decent terms and conditions applying to all NHS staff. The main way that trusts can make savings through these companies is by employing new staff on different, and worse, terms and conditions.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): On the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) about North Tees and Hartlepool Solutions, as the LLP is called, does my hon. Friend agree that its immediate intention to introduce worse terms for new starters sets a dangerous precedent?

Liz Twist: I very much agree. It is a very dangerous precedent that does not respect the rights of those staff.

Alex Cunningham: Further to that point, is my hon. Friend aware that the question and answer document produced by the North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust says that NHS staff transferred into the new company can expect a pay rise this year, but nothing is guaranteed in the future? They are already seeing their future conditions eroded, unless the new company awards them the pay rise they will get under the current system.

Liz Twist: That is absolutely correct, and I have raised with my local trust the potential move away from NHS pay rises.

The main way trusts can make savings is by employing the new staff on worse terms and conditions, which means lower pay rates, less holiday, inferior sickness schemes and no access to the NHS pension scheme. As colleagues said, even transferred staff may be moved on to the worse terms and conditions over time. Trusts are doing that to the lowest-paid workers, who are essential to keeping our hospitals going.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that doctors and clinicians should prescribe only medicines that have a strong evidence base and have been shown to be effective in trials? On that basis, does she agree that wholly owned subsidiaries for the treatment of illness would be ineffective?
Liz Twist: I certainly agree that this is the wrong medicine for the NHS’s problems, which, as hon. Members said, derive from the pressure on NHS finances and the underfunding of the NHS.

Rachael Maskell: The last time there was a segmentation of facilities management, we saw the rise of MRSA and other communicable diseases, so the evidence shows that this is a bad move.

Liz Twist: That is a very valid point, and it must be considered carefully.

We are creating divisions between staff in the facilities management companies and other NHS staff by introducing a two-tier workforce, which health service unions such as Unison—my union—have worked hard to move away from. The setting up of these wholly owned subsidiaries is a retrograde step. It insults and undervalues the staff who do essential but less visible jobs in the NHS. It deprives them of the pension scheme that their colleagues have access to and exposes trusts to equal pay claims. Equally important, it risks breaking up our NHS—perhaps not today, but in the near future.

I have been looking at the health press in preparing for this debate, and I have seen that there are plenty of companies out there willing to advise on setting up NHS subsidiary companies and look at the benefits of such companies. There are no such advantages. There is no reason why NHS staff working together cannot produce a better NHS. Indeed, they are doing so all over the country. We need to stop this trend of establishing such companies. There are no such advantages. There is no reason why NHS staff working together cannot produce a better NHS. Indeed, they are doing so all over the country. We need to stop this trend of establishing wholly owned subsidiaries in the NHS. We must respect our hospital staff and prevent the fragmentation and privatisation of our NHS.

4.13 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, as always, Mr Hollobone. It is also good to see a number of Members from across the House in the Chamber to debate this important issue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this debate. I am pleased to be able to join her in discussing an issue that is of concern and interest to many in the House.

I understand that Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust established its wholly owned subsidiary company, QE Facilities, in 2014 to provide estates, building and engineering services to the trust and cleaning services to the new emergency care centre building. QE Facilities is a separate legal entity, which operates along commercial lines. It has separate governance arrangements and the ability to employ its own staff and deliver services to other organisations on a commercial basis. As the hon. Lady said, a number of staff from the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Gateshead transferred under TUPE rules to the new organisation in December 2014. I will respond to her points.

A number of hon. Members raised the concern that this is a bad move. It is right that the board of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital was able to use the powers enacted by the previous Labour Government. It did so because creating a subsidiary is, in its view, the most effective and efficient way of maintaining the trust’s hospital estate, which includes several new buildings. Again, that is consistent with the previous Labour Government’s approach, which was to allow local trusts to determine the best manner of managing their own estates.

Alex Cunningham: I do not care which Government provided the enabling legislation. Surely the Minister agrees that the intention was never to undermine the working terms and conditions of people within the NHS just to enable trusts to cut the amount of money they need to spend?

Stephen Barclay: I will happily address that. The hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) also made that point and said that this is about exploitation. The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) may not care whether the legislation was introduced by a Labour Government; I was merely drawing hon. Members’ attention to the fact that when the legislation was passed it was not described as privatisation. It is obviously a leap to describe the legislation as enabling privatisation when the subsidiaries are wholly owned by the NHS.

Alex Cunningham: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again. The North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust said in its question and answer document that such an organisation could be taken over by another organisation—in other words, it could be privatised. This is one step along the way to the potential privatisation of all those services.

Stephen Barclay: The trust has stressed that the organisation remains in public ownership. Let me deal with the hon. Gentleman’s substantive point—it was also raised by the hon. Member for Bradford South—that this is about exploitation. I discussed that point with the trust ahead of the debate.

Previously, the trust had difficulty in attracting and retaining quality maintenance staff because the salaries paid in the local market were about £19,000 per annum. Under the subsidiary company, multi-skilled craftspeople are employed at about £25,000 per annum, plus a performance bonus, attracting better-qualified staff and ending retention issues, in exchange for the fact that they do not have access to the NHS pension.

Liz Twist rose—

Stephen Barclay: I will happily give way to the hon. Lady in due course.

That is not about exploitation; it is about empowering members of staff. They get higher pay in the short term in return for a less generous pension. The hon. Member for Stockton North might disagree—

Judith Cummins: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Barclay: I signalled that I will give way to the hon. Member for Blaydon. She called the debate, so she should go first.
It is not accurate to say that this is simply about exploiting people if their base salary is increasing from £19,000 to £25,000, as it is in that trust. One can look at the wider bundled package of benefits and total remuneration, but one cannot describe a salary increase of £6,000 as exploitation.

**Liz Twist:** The Minister is raising an issue of great concern to me, which I have discussed with the chief executive of the foundation trust, so this is not coming as news to him. If we move away from a structured pay system and give additional salary payments over and above allowed recruitment and retention bonuses, we are laying the trust or the organisation open to the claim that they are not providing equal pay for work of equal value. A huge amount of work went into creating “Agenda for Change” to avoid exactly that problem and to address recruitment and retention.

**Stephen Barclay:** The hon. Lady is ignoring the fact that that already happens in the NHS, for existing trust staff: some staff opt out of the NHS pension, and not all the staff who TUPE-ed across in this arrangement were in the NHS pension. Once again, those on the Labour Benches want to deny the choice and options that apply to NHS staff.

**Judith Cummins:** I thank the Minister for giving way, because he has heard me twice now, but I welcome the opportunity. Does he not agree that the difference between then and now is that NHS trusts now are being forced down the path of wholly owned subsidiary companies because of financial constraints? It is not good enough for the Government simply to stand by and watch that happen.

**Stephen Barclay:** Again, that is a complete misrepresentation. The trust itself has pointed to the benefits of the arrangement. Let me give a concrete example of how the arrangement is delivering to the trust savings in the interests of patients.

Under the previous delivery system, local pathology samples were sometimes lost and delayed—that is not in the interests of patients. The QEF brought in a revised system of procuring all sample containers and issuing those to GPs across the region before delivering samples to the hospital pathology laboratory hubs within four hours. The trust forecasts that that will deliver significant benefits—and, indeed, other trusts are interested in the services. By operating on a more commercial model, therefore, not only has the trust improved how it deals with samples and prevented those samples from being lost as in the past, but it has put in place a system that is better for patients and attractive to GPs in other trusts who now want to contract the services.

**Dr Poulter:** The Minister is slightly at odds about the point being made. The point is not how it is open to the trust to procure the best clinical services but how, later, through a company, a staff might be re-employed on a lower salary. Clearly, trusts already have flexibility through “Agenda for Change” to start people on a higher pay point, but I wondered more generally whether my hon. Friend supports national pay bargaining and “Agenda for Change”.

**Stephen Barclay:** The Chancellor made his support for the “Agenda for Change” programme clear in the Budget. My hon. Friend is aware of the commitment that the Chancellor made to fund that outwith the spending review 2015 process. That is a matter of record and one my hon. Friend is well aware of. The point being made, however, is that the flexibilities are popular with staff within the trust. Again, that is not simply a matter of me saying that; it is reflected in the staff survey of those working at the trust.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Stephen Barclay:** I will happily take interventions, but first I will finish this point, addressing the previous issue. The recent staff survey was extremely positive: 86% felt part of the Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust group. Furthermore, the figure for those with a positive response to the level of pay was 15% higher than the NHS comparator. The idea that the arrangement is exploiting people when the staff survey shows them to be 15% more approving than in other areas is again not a fair representation of the case.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): In the short time remaining, I would like to move the Minister on to the issue of accountability for public money. Following a freedom of information request, in the case of Yeovil we understand that the benefit to the trust is several million pounds-worth of income, which is a lack of income from the Treasury—I have written to the Minister about this and I will be grateful for an answer. Is the Government’s position that they would be happy to forgo the expected income to the Treasury so that those companies can be set up to undercut wages?

**Stephen Barclay:** As I set out in my reply to the hon. Lady, the Department has been clear that setting up a subsidiary is not a vehicle to avoid VAT—that is not acceptable. In the autumn, we sent out guidance to make that clear. As a former Treasury Minister myself, I assure her that Treasury Ministers would take a very close interest if they felt that an abuse of VAT was taking place.

The reality is that commissioners and regulators are responsible for ensuring that NHS providers act in the best interests of patients and taxpayers. We would expect providers to work closely with their employees in any developments.

**John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

**Stephen Barclay:** I am conscious of the time, but I am very keen to take an intervention from the hon. Gentleman.

**John Grogan:** The Minister is being very generous. Clearly there is a substantial difference of view here, but would he agree that given that public money is involved, it is very much in the public interest that the business plans that the trusts are producing for the wholly owned subsidiaries are published and public, so that they can be scrutinised? In the case of the Airedale trust in my constituency, we discovered that 60% of the savings on purchasing are in VAT. Those figures should be in the public domain, so people can see what is being done with public money in their interests.

**Stephen Barclay:** The slightly puzzling issue here is that the savings accrued from the subsidiaries are for the benefit of the local health economy of the trust. This is a subsidiary company 100% owned by its host trust.
The more efficient the subsidiary is, the better it is at dealing with things such as its pathology—not only do we avoid samples being lost, but we run a more efficient system in a more commercial manner, which brings more money into the healthcare economy and gives the flexibility to compete effectively in the local job market for maintenance staff and others.

The benefits of those arrangements accrue to the trust that owns 100% of the subsidiary. That is why, under legislation of the previous Labour Government—correctly in my view, but clearly not in the view of the Labour Members—the local trust is empowered to empower in turn the local members of staff. That is then reflected in the staff survey, which shows a more favourable result in this trust.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the Minister, who has been generous with his time, but does he not acknowledge that the failing finances of the NHS are forcing trusts down that route? I am meeting the Minister next week to talk about York Teaching Hospital’s failed finances. That is the driver of the changes and, therefore, the fundamental issue still has to be addressed.

Stephen Barclay: I do not know whether we are moving away from the subject to a wider debate about finance, but the Chancellor’s Budget settlement makes the Government’s finance commitment clear. The fact is that the issue of subsidiary companies is about using the resources of the NHS in the most efficient manner. That is the view not just of the Government and of the previous Labour Government, but of the trust itself. It is delivering a better outcome for patients and delivering savings—I repeat, the savings accrued go to the benefit of the trust that owns 100% of the subsidiary. It is a shame that those on the Labour Benches seem to want to deprive staff of choice and opportunity. Staff are benefiting, and that is reflected in the staff survey.

I hope that in responding to the debate I have allayed a number of the concerns of the hon. Member for Blaydon about the setting up of subsidiary companies by trusts. I am sorry that there is such concern about the legislation put on the statute book by the previous Labour Government and that it is being deemed to be a form of privatisation.

Alex Cunningham: Does the Minister think it is fair for one of two different people in an organisation to receive a defined benefit pension scheme with a 50% contribution and the other to get 3% into a defined contribution scheme worth a fraction of the other in pension terms?

Stephen Barclay: Within the NHS as a whole—nothing to do with subsidiaries—there is a range of treatment of staff on pensions. First, there are the legacy pension arrangements for staff in previous schemes and, secondly, people opt out of existing pension arrangements in the NHS. Again, it is a complete mischaracterisation of this debate on subsidiaries to suggest that there are differences. The point, however, is that there are also differences in pay, as has come out of this debate: the maintenance staff for whom the trust is paying a premium can be paid so because of the subsidiary.

Liz Twist: I thank the Minister for giving way—the only way I can get a response in is by intervening. I have a few separate points. First, on the Labour legislation, is it not strange that the subsidiary companies have only started to appear in this form since 2014? As my colleagues said, that is a reflection of the fact that we have a shortfall in funding for the NHS. Secondly, I want to mention the path lab example the Minister gave. As I said in my speech, there is no reason why existing NHS staff in the NHS trust cannot make the improvements—they do all the time—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
4.30 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the proposed closure of police stations in Solihull and the West Midlands.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am sure I am not alone in saying that crime is one of the issues that people most frequently raise on the doorstep and in constituency surgeries. Few things matter more to my constituents than knowing that the streets are safe and that Solihull remains a peaceful, welcoming and vibrant community. That is why I have made standing up for local police services one of my top priorities. Since being elected in 2015, I have fought successfully to prevent cuts to our local team of police community support officers and I have supported calls for Ministers to increase police funding across the west midlands. In that same period, David Jamieson, the police and crime commissioner, quite clearly has been making cuts to the police service in Solihull, cutting the number of patrol cars in the borough and closing one of my constituency’s two police stations in 2015.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that West Midlands police has lost £145 million in funding, through decisions made by the Tory Government and, before them, the Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition from 2010?

Julian Knight: The Government have been pretty clear that police funding has been protected in real terms once local funding is taken into account, and they are investing £1 billion more in policing in 2017-18 than in 2015-16, despite continued pressure on public finances. Labour always likes to insist that someone else will pick up the tab, but if PCCs want the power to help their police forces, they must expect the responsibility that goes with it, including questioning by Members of Parliament.

Mr Jamieson has announced plans to close Solihull police station, leaving my constituency without a single proper police space. The commissioner claims that it is under-utilised, but why should that come as a surprise when he has been paring back our local police services for years?

I strongly believe that for local politicians to be held accountable, the devolution of power must be accompanied by the devolution of responsibility, including financial responsibility. The public elect representatives to take decisions, not simply to shift blame and demand more money from someone else. In 2015, I joined my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) in urging Mr Jamieson to take responsibility for his powers and to raise the funds needed by the West Midlands police, and lobbied Ministers to grant our region an exemption from the usual 2% ceiling on raising the precept.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman says that police funding was protected. He has just referred to the precept—the precept flexibility raises £9.5 million. The police service needs £22 million to stand still. It is not true, therefore, that police funding has been protected, is it?

Julian Knight: The £9.5 million is a significant sum in that respect; I will move on to where, specifically, I think the money should come from, in terms of the police and crime commissioner.

Devolution does not mean leaving each region simply to sink or swim on its own. At Westminster, we help to oversee the pooling and sharing of resources across the UK. I was therefore pleased that the Government recently announced hundreds of millions of pounds in extra cash for policing, including a £9.5 million boost for the West Midlands police, which the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) has just referred to. I was confident, along with many of my constituents, that that had put our vital police services on a secure footing, so hon. Members can imagine my shock when I learned that the commissioner plans to close Solihull police station and many police stations across the west midlands.

Let us be clear: there is no good financial case for this closure. According to the press, Mr Jamieson is sitting on a £100 million reserve. On top of that, he recently spent an extra £10 million on non-frontline staff, many of whom do very valuable work but cannot substitute a strong, local police presence. In such circumstances, extra cuts to frontline services are completely non-justifiable. We must not underestimate the significance of this: until recently, our town had two proper community police stations.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I want to ask about the £10 million for non-frontline staff. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that we are talking about fraud investigators, child abuse investigators, 999 call handlers and forensic scientists? Does he think that getting rid of those will help to drive crime down or up?

Julian Knight: Of course, I recognise that the non-frontline staff do very valuable work. However, as I will explain shortly, the police and crime commissioner cannot say that his cuts will make a substantive difference either to frontline services or to these non-frontline staff.

In my view, what Mr Jamieson has done is a straightforward breach of trust. When Shirley police station closed its doors in 2015, local residents were reassured that the Solihull branch offered a long-term future for a properly resourced local police presence. Now, less than three years later, it is to go, too. Instead of the Solihull branch, the commissioner proposes to have a front desk somewhere in the borough, but even though the consultation on that proposal is under way, we have not been told where that will be or what precisely it will comprise. Before Solihull police station is closed, I strongly believe that local residents have a right to know exactly what will replace it. At present, they are simply being told to trust Mr Jamieson—as I have already explained, they have no reason to do that.

Worse, research by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who is here today to show her strength of feeling and support—as a Whip she is not permitted to speak—raises serious doubts about the extent to which the money raised from the sale of our police station can be redirected to frontline staff. According to the Library, police and crime commissioners are allowed to move funds from their capital to their revenue accounts only in very limited circumstances—primarily to deliver structural changes and to unlock long-term savings.
My constituents deserve to know whether—and how—Mr Jamieson actually intends to use the sale to boost local policing, as I have certainly heard nothing about new capital projects in Solihull or in any of the constituencies of my hon. Friends. It will not do for our police station to be sold to finance new programmes in other parts of the west midlands. My constituents should be given clear assurances that any revenue savings made by closing the station will be spent to boost local police services, and that there is not carte blanche to redirect them all over the place.

Not that local residents have had much of an opportunity to have their say—stakeholders have been offered only 18 working days to respond to the consultation, and originally no point of contact at all was provided for the general public. Only after a lot of chasing by my office was an email address finally provided for the public. Other concerned MPs, including my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, and I were not even given the courtesy of a call before the details were released to the press. My colleagues and I find that the commissioner is growing ever more autocratic in his dealings with us and our communities, issuing diktats from the centre against the will of local residents.

Solihull is a large town with a distinct character. Residents expect to see that fact reflected in their public services. Local Conservatives and I fought hard over the past few years to secure a devolution deal for the west midlands that brought power down from Westminster, while protecting the authority and independence of our local council. Decisions such as these will only confirm many of my constituents’ worst fears about how communities like Solihull risk getting short-changed by regional institutions that focus too heavily on major urban centres.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman must realise that West Midlands police received £444.1 million in 2017-18 and will receive the same amount under its budget for 2018-19. By any logic, that means there has been a cut somewhere. We are faced with the likely closure of at least three police stations in Coventry: Willenhall, Canley and Foleshill. Something has to give, and he should recognise that there has been a cut somewhere.

Julian Knight: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is arguing for the closure of his local police stations. I certainly would not do that in this respect. I agree that there needs to be a reallocation of resources, and perhaps there are older properties that might be used more usefully, but at the heart of this issue and of the real anger in my community is the arbitrary way closures have been made, the lack of proper consultation and the fact that there seems to be no real path for the future of policing in Solihull. If the police and crime commissioner had come to us and said, “This is what will replace it,” perhaps I would have said, “Okay, let’s have a conversation,” but he did not call. He just decided to make closures and release the details to the press.

The difficulty is that that brings devolution into a little disrepute. Of course Birmingham has its own policing needs and the commissioner has a duty to see that those are met. I am sure that the centralised and reactive policing model he appears to favour is better suited to urban trouble spots than to suburban and semi-rural communities, but boroughs such as Solihull face discrete policing challenges of their own. Residents often tell me of their serious concerns about so-called acquisitive crime, such as burglary, and vehicle crime, which is on the increase in the borough. Another potentially serious public order problem that Solihull has faced over the years—certainly since I have represented it in this place—is the repeated occupation every summer of our parks and open spaces by unauthorised encampments. Those events are a source of enormous disruption and distress for local residents, many of whom bring their concerns to my office or tell me about them on the doorstep. A strong local police presence is crucial to protecting communities such as Solihull from unauthorised Traveller encampments. When it comes to that, the reactive approach is the wrong approach.

I will close by saying that this is not the end of the fight. Mr Jamieson may have tried to push decisions through without proper consultation, but both in this place and on the ground in the west midlands, my colleagues and I will keep his proposals under the closest scrutiny, bring him to account and continue to make the case for a wiser and fairer deal for our constituents from this police and crime commissioner.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am obliged to begin calling the Front Benchers at seven minutes past five. Five Members are seeking to catch my eye, so I am going to impose a five-minute limit so that everyone can get in. I call Jack Dromey.

4.43 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

The last Labour Government built neighbourhood policing. We put 17,000 extra police officers and 16,000 police community support officers on the beat. We did so because we took seriously the first duty of any Government: to ensure the safety and security of their citizens. That model of detection and prevention was popular with the public and saw crime fall by 43%. That was slammed into reverse when this Prime Minister was Home Secretary. The number of police has fallen by 20,000 overall, and by 2,000 in the west midlands. Crime is up 14% overall, with gun crime up 15%, serious acquisitive crime up 17% and burglaries up 8%.

The Tories frequently praise the police but then fail to stand up for them in this place. Do they not hear what we hear in our constituencies? I organised a public meeting for local people who were deeply concerned about rising crime, and one woman had spent 66 years—

Julian Knight: The hon. Gentleman said that the Tories do not do a lot in this place to try to get the best deal for the police. He and I, and my colleagues, have worked together on this issue for a long time. Does he not recognise that decisions such as these and the way they are taken break the bonds of trust between us?

Jack Dromey: The decisions are actually proposals from the chief constable in the first instance—I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is criticising the
chief constable—and then they go to the PCC. The simple reality is that our police service in the west Midlands faces increasingly impossible pressures because of the cuts that have been made by the hon. Gentleman’s Government, and he has not once stood up and opposed those cuts or voted against them.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend recognise that my constituency, which neighbours his, has lost more than 15 community support officers, numerous police officers and a huge number of support people due to police stations closing? That is purely the responsibility of this Government, who have failed to fund the police service properly.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He hears in his community what I hear in mine. He hears, for example, about elderly residents’ fear of going out at night. Local retailers increasingly complain that people do not come out when it is dark, such is people’s fear of going on to the streets in some of our communities.

Do Government Members not talk to police officers like we do? One officer said to me, “Jack, criminals increasingly have free rein to do what they want, because there are simply not enough of us to keep our community safe.” Do Government Members not know that response times are going up, including for victims of domestic violence? Do they not understand that the hollowing out of neighbourhood policing undermines the struggle to combat the growing and uniquely awful threat of terrorism?

The Prime Minister said, “We cut police and cut crime, we protected budgets, and our approach is fair.” Yes, the Conservatives cut police, but she is wrong that they cut crime and protected budgets. Some £145 million has been cut overall and there has recently been, in effect, a £12.5 million real-terms cut. As for fairness, the west Midlands certainly has not been treated fairly compared with Surrey, the Thames valley or Hampshire, for example.

The police also have a price. We do not hear Government Members standing up for them. The thin blue line is being stretched ever thinner. There are mounting problems of sickness and stress. Officers frequently put their lives on the line to protect the public, and some are seriously injured as a consequence. The hundreds of officers in the west Midlands who were forced out under regulation A19 paid the price with their jobs.

What cheek Conservative Members of Parliament have to come here and protest about the impact of police cuts when they are guilty of a lamentable failure to stand up for the police service. They supported the biggest cuts since the war, including recent real-terms cuts. To blame our chief constable and our police and crime commissioner is completely wrong. We could give numerous examples of Conservative attacks—my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) mentioned back office staff—but let me quote what the Minister said about head office at Lloyd House:

“Officers and staff in the West Midlands do an excellent job keeping our communities safe and this refurbishment will not only save money, but will also mean they will have an improved working environment to carry out their vital duties.”

The Conservatives have sought every spurious way possible to escape responsibility, but they cannot. The people of the west Midlands know that the Conservative party has failed to stand up for them and that Labour always will.

4.48 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Hollobone, £145 million has been cut from the West Midlands police budget since 2010—a truly staggering cut for a police force to absorb. To set that in context, that money could have paid the salaries of 750 police constables over the past eight years—police constables who could have been patrolling our streets, tackling crime and antisocial behaviour.

Since the Conservative Government came to power in 2010, West Midlands police has lost 2,000 officers, taking their number to its lowest since 1974—the year the force was established. The demands on our officers, however, have not fallen in a similar fashion. If anything, they have increased, with emerging issues such as cybercrime and the persistent threat of terrorism adding to the force’s already heavy workload.

The constant pressure exacted by the Conservative Government’s never-ending diktat to do more with less is taking its toll on our overstretched and under-resourced officers. On one day last summer, a check of the force sickness system revealed that 612 officers and staff were booked off sick, with 176 suffering mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, fatigue and stress. Given that West Midlands police now requires an additional £22 million simply to stand still, the chief constable is left with two choices, each as unpalatable as the other: to reduce manpower further or close police stations.

Let me be clear: despite efforts to blame the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner for making difficult decisions, the cuts have been inflicted on our constituents clearly and unambiguously as a result of the Conservative Government’s ideological austerity programme. As a result, the chief constable has proposed to release 24 buildings, which will save £5 million a year: enough to protect the jobs of 100 police officers. While I accept that the majority of the buildings to be closed are not open to the public, their closure will still have a detrimental impact on officers who will have to travel further to use essential services, wasting valuable police time.

We cannot ignore away the fact that the police grant settlement confirmed real-terms cuts, including a £12.5 million reduction in spending power for West Midlands police. The police and crime commissioner, David Jamieson, recently summed up the situation rather succinctly. He said:

“West Midlands police has suffered the biggest cuts in the country and now the Tory MPs who voted for those cuts recently are complaining about the consequences in their constituencies.”

It seems the irony is indeed lost on some.

The Government have argued that council tax can be increased by the PCC by up to £12 for a band D property, a measure that has been adopted by all but three PCCs. Despite that, West Midlands police has the lowest budget increase per head of population in the country, further damaging its ability to carry out its full range of duties. It has also been claimed that back-office costs have risen by £10 million, but, when one looks a little deeper, one sees that those so-called back office costs include nationally mandated pay increases, the hiring of specialist staff to allow police officers to carry out warranted duties such as arresting criminals and the hiring of call handlers to deal with the surge in demand faced by the police force.
These issues are only a snapshot of the systemic and unprecedented pressures faced by our police service. Police officers exude many of the most admirable characteristics of our society. Brave, caring and committed, they do their duty to allow us to go about our daily lives, safe in the knowledge that we and our families are safe.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Recently, in the Willenhall area of Coventry there have been public meetings where the public have voiced concern about increases in drugs, burglaries and so forth. As a result, the police have looked at the possibility of using surge tactics in those areas. That demonstrates how the public are becoming aware of the under-policing in Coventry—we have lost between 200 and 300 officers—and they are uneasy about the policing and crime situation in the west midlands, starting in Coventry.

Preet Kaur Gill: I absolutely agree. Police officers join the force because they want to make a difference, serve their communities and help people. We accept their service gratefully, but, in so doing, we also accept a responsibility to offer them the same protection and support that they provide us. Policing cannot be done on the cheap; the safety of our families is worth too much. That is why I will continue to stand up for my local police force and my constituents by continuing to oppose the Government’s damaging and dangerous cuts.

Arguments about the closure of police stations are not new. The received wisdom of the Government to date is that it is an operational matter; that it is about putting police on the street rather than in offices and adapting to new ways of working. That is, it would appear, until we are talking about the west midlands and a Labour police and crime commissioner.

We should not be mourning the closure of police stations. The problem before the House is not local mismanagement but the culmination of a series of untenable cuts that started when the present occupant of 10 Downing Street was the Home Secretary and which continue today, destroying the capacity of our police to control the streets and protect the public from violent crime.

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opportunity. The relationship of trust that he has built with the community has transformed the amount of intelligence coming into the police and the effectiveness of the police in response.

What great police officers such as Sergeant Hanif and PC Adam Koch need is a Government who are on their side, rather than a Government who are determined to cut their service to ribbons. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) so eloquently put it, West Midlands police is now the smallest it has been since it was created in 1974. It has suffered real-terms cuts of something like £145 million. The idea that somehow different decisions on the precept could have corrected a cut on that scale is frankly fanciful. Given the rise in crime that we have in the west midlands, and the fact that we are one of the most dangerous hotspots for counter-terrorism policing in the country, it beggars belief when we put that risk of harm alongside the cuts we have had, which are so different from the financial settlements that other police forces have enjoyed.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Liam Byrne: I will happily give way; perhaps my close neighbour can tell me how it is that Hampshire can enjoy a different settlement from the West Midlands police force when we have a threat assessment that is so very different.

Mr Mitchell: I just want to be clear: the right hon. Gentleman refers, quite rightly, to the fact that the west midlands is a hotspot for some of the specialist terror policing, but will he also acknowledge that the Government have, quite separately, given significant increases of funds for that very purpose?

Liam Byrne: There has been a provision for counter-terrorism policing, but, as the right hon. Gentleman knows better than I do, neighbourhood policing is the frontline of the fight against terrorism in this country. The stronger the frontline, the safer we are. In the west midlands, our frontline is being cut to shreds.

Mr Jim Cunningham: My right hon. Friend will notice that in an intervention earlier I mentioned Willenhall in particular, where there have been public meetings. It is strange when we talk about fighting terrorism that there is a police station in that area in which high-profile prisoners are kept. I wonder where in the west midlands they will put them if there are any further arrests.

Liam Byrne: Exactly. Those threats are now multiplying across the region.

I respect the task that the Police Minister has to try to perform. He has taken the time to listen to representations from west midlands MPs of all political stripes. I am afraid that he was not backed up by either the Prime Minister or the Chancellor; they did not give the Home Office in general, and him in particular, the financial settlement that we needed in order to safeguard our communities. For us in Hodge Hill, that means that we now have the proposed closure of the Shard End police base—something that both Councillor Ian Ward and I disagree with.

We need a police base in Shard End, because—as was explained to me during my own glorious fortnight as the Minister for police and counter-terrorism, before I went on to serve a further two years as a Home Office Minister—neighbourhood policing creates a different kind of relationship between the police service and the community. It unlocks a level of trust, intelligence and insight that makes it much easier to crack down on crime. When we shut down police bases, we weaken the frontline in that fight. I do not want to see crime, drug dealing and violent crime rise any further. That is why I call on the Minister today to fix the problem in the West Midlands Police finances, give us the money we deserve and let our brave men and women of the West Midlands Police service get on with the job they are so dedicated to doing.

5.4 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my parliamentary neighbour, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), and to congratulate my other parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight).

I will add a few points to those that have already been made. Of course it is common across the Chamber that we support and praise the excellent work that the local police do. I pay particular tribute to Jane Bailey, who is responsible for policing in the royal town of Sutton Coldfield and is the latest in an excellent line of chiefs of police. This is also a community of Members of Parliament who, on the whole, work quite well together on common themes. I think of GKN, of homelessness and our common purpose—I say this particularly to the Police Minister—in trying to ensure proper funding for the families of those who suffered so grievously and have not yet got closure following the terrible bombings in Birmingham, many years ago.

We do co-operate, but today there is a raw party political difference between us, which was set out clearly by my parliamentary neighbour, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). I agree with quite a lot of what the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill said about the nature of policing. My principal complaint, however, and the reason why I am pleased to support the case put by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull, is that does not appear to have been any proper consultation. Indeed, I learned about the proposition of closing the royal town’s police station through a leak from a Labour councillor, which then appeared in the local press. That is not the proper way to consult.

There is a consultation going on now in the royal town, through the town council, and this is the motion that was passed very strongly last week. It said:

“This Council is extremely concerned that the West Midlands Police Crime Commissioner (PCC) is proposing to close Sutton Coldfield Police Station...The Council notes that the PCC has made a number of budgetary decisions, such as investing heavily in buildings elsewhere and cutting front line policemen, that materially disadvantage our Town no longer meeting the needs of our community and demands in the strongest terms that the closure decision is reversed immediately.”

It went on to say:

“The Council further registers its disappointment that there has been zero engagement by the PCC with the residents or their elected representatives.”

It is that lack of engagement that I wish to bring to the Minister’s attention.
[Mr Andrew Mitchell]

In her opening speech, Janet Cairns made a truly excellent point. She said:

“I understand that the service could move to another area or to another building but it would not be the same, it would not be the bespoke service that we have now. It would not give us confidence as residents”.

The other councillors who spoke made the same point. There is a strong feeling that a party political point is being made here in identifying Solihull and Sutton Coldfield as the two key targets that lose their major police facility. Councillor David Allan said, “It’s a political attack on the Tory heartlands.”

I am concerned at the lack of consultation and very specifically at the way in which it appears that Conservative areas are being targeted. No one doubts that this is a tough settlement, but I will ask the Minister three very brief questions.

Jack Dromey: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Mitchell: I will, yes—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. It is not for me to interfere, but I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman simply will not have enough time if the hon. Gentleman intervenes.

Mr Mitchell: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman. I have three questions for the Police Minister. First of all, will he confirm that, although we can do almost anything with statistics, funding this year over last year is up by £9.5 million, so those who referred to this year’s “cuts” are either innumerate or deliberately deceiving our constituents? Secondly, will he confirm that the West Midlands police has reserves of £121.1 million, or 20.2% of overall funding—the average figure across England and Wales is 15.1%—and there has been an increase of just under £27 million in those reserves since 2011? Thirdly, and finally, will he confirm that there is an unenviable one. Do they add to the toll of 2,000 officers lost, when more than 80% of the force’s budget is for staffing, or do they make savings in the budget is for staffing, or do they make savings in the force’s overall efficiency level rating? As I understand it, the professional opinion is that West Midlands police was not as efficient in its use of taxpayers’ money as it should be—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. We come now to the Front-Bench speeches. I call Louise Haigh.

5.9 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) for securing the debate, as it allows us to set the record straight on police station closures—not only in the west midlands, but across the country.

I start by zooming out for a second and taking a look at what has happened to police stations and front counters over the last eight years. More than 40% have been shut during the time the Conservative party has been in government. In 2010, there were 901 front counters able to deal with the public; the figure today stands at just 510. West Mercia, just next door to the west midlands, now relies on only three front counters, down from 31.

Warwickshire has four, down from 14. Bedfordshire has just two to serve the entire county. In Cambridgeshire last month, Jason Ablewhite, the Conservative police and crime commissioner, was forced to announce the closure of one of only two police stations open to the public left in Cambridge as part of a massive savings drive.

Collectively, that handful of stations now serve millions of people. In those counties, stations were a fixture in each town. They have disappeared. The face-to-face contact and the trust that that engendered, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Liam Byrne) said, has gone, as officers have been reduced to offering a purely responsive service. Officers now routinely have to travel large distances to book in suspects or take evidence. Preventive and proactive crime prevention, which would have taken place out of a community hub, has now been diminished.

We could make party political points in each of these cases. After all, the closures mentioned in all those examples were under Conservative PCCs. However, the public would recognise how absurd that is—they would call me disingenuous—because the chief constables, in consultation with the PCCs, can only play the hand they have been dealt by the Government in Westminster. That hand has been anything but helping. More than £2.7 billion has been cut from the overall police budget in real terms since the Conservatives came to power, with more than 21,000 police officers lost. Meanwhile, crime has soared and demand has rocketed. Communities have noticed it; they see police officers less and they feel increasingly insecure.

The force in the west midlands knows that as well as any. The last eight years have been truly unprecedented in its history, as we have heard. It has reached the bare bones—of that there can be no doubt. The choice facing the West Midlands chief constable, and indeed the PCC, is now an unenviable one. Do they add to the toll of 2,000 officers lost, when more than 80% of the force’s budget is for staffing, or do they make savings in the estate? Is that a choice any force would like to face? Of course not, but it is a choice that has been imposed on them.

Julian Knight: Does the hon. Lady not recognise that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said, with £121 million in reserves, the police and crime commissioner could at least wait and show us precisely what he plans for my borough and its policing?

Louise Haigh: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has spoken to either the PCC or the chief constable recently, but I have a detailed plan from the chief constable of what he plans to spend his reserves on. The force currently has £106 million in reserves. By 31 March 2019, it will have £54 million, of which £12 million is required by the National Audit Office to be held for general reserves, and £10 million will be held for an insurance reserve. By 2020, reserves will be held only at levels legally required and necessary for day-to-day operational policing.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned earlier that he had not heard of any capital projects going ahead in the west midlands. In fact, Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary has praised West Midlands police for preparing for the future and investing in a huge IT transformation
project and data-driven analysis, so it is interesting that he does not know of those projects, or indeed what the reserves are being spent on.

**Julian Knight:** I did not actually say that there were no capital projects; I said that the money from the sale of the police stations could not be used to directly fund capital projects unless they could be shown to be money-saving.

**Louise Haigh:** I think the hon. Gentleman said that he was not aware of any capital projects benefiting Solihull. There are two that will directly benefit Solihull and indeed will replace the front station access that is being closed down.

Incredibly, the outlook that I just set out is set to get even worse as a result of further real-terms cuts that Conservative Members from the west midlands voted for last month. David Jamieson has warned that, after receiving the biggest cut in the entire country, West Midlands police will need £22 million just to stand still. This is not only at a time when crime is soaring: 999s and 101s have reached levels that only used to be received on new year’s eve; missing persons are being reported to the police at unprecedented levels; and mental health calls are being dealt with by the police at levels never seen before. Some 83% of calls to command and control centres are now non-crime, while crime and antisocial behaviour is soaring.

Counter-terror spending was also mentioned, as well as the reserves. Both are used by the Government and Government Members as a diversion, saying that money is being spent on policing when in fact, for every £1 spent on counter-terror, £2-worth of demand is generated for local forces. Neither of those can be said to be reducing demand and increasing funding to West Midlands police or any other police force across the country. The fact is that six Conservative Members from the west Midlands voted for these cuts and are now crying foul when the chief constable has been forced to set out their consequences.

The 24 buildings that the chief constable plans to release will save £5 million per year. Regrettably, that will not make up for the real-terms cut in Home Office funding for West Midlands in the year ahead. Nevertheless, even while making those savings, which have been forced on the force, the plans will retain all 10 front counters, recognising the vital service that they offer to the public, while tech and data innovations will mean that the police are not required to return to the station as often as they used to.

However, with crime continuing to soar in the west midlands—14% in the last year alone—further real-terms cuts are reckless, and the public are clear that the responsibility lies with the Government and with Government Members who voted them through. It is the Tories who took a reckless gamble with public safety, and now communities in the west midlands are paying the price.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** Will the Minister conclude his remarks no later than 5.28 pm, to allow the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) to respond?

5.16 pm

**The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) on securing the debate. In my experience, few Members pressed me harder on the case for more support for the police in the run-in to the funding settlement. He is a tireless advocate on that point.

I also associate myself with the remarks from my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and the former Policing Minister, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), in praising the work of West Midlands police, which is recognised to be one of the most effective, innovative and important police forces in the country. My right hon. Friend asked for verification, and he is right that its efficiency rating was downgraded from outstanding to good. However, it is generally recognised that West Midlands police does an extremely good job under very difficult circumstances indeed.

What is the debate about? Labour Members have tried to make it a tribal debate about police funding. Listening carefully to what my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield and my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull actually said, the debate is about accountability and respect to the public whom we serve as elected representatives. The point made to the House is that there has been a deficit and a failing in that respect, which I will address in my remarks. The reality is that—again, Labour Members have tried to shift around on this—we operate in a system of accountability, in which Ministers are thankfully not responsible for decisions on police stations in Solihull or anywhere else.

The accountability to the public that we serve is through the directly elected police and crime commissioners. Whether Conservative or Labour, PCCs are accountable to the public for these kind of operating decisions, which matter because the public care about them. People are sensitive about police stations, as I know from my own area. We need to be clear about where accountability lies. The attempt to blame others is disingenuous. Accountability needs to be clear: the directly elected PCCs, whether Labour or Conservative, are accountable to the public for those decisions. We do these issues a disservice if we try to fog that.

In this context, let us be clear: the PCC in this case—I would say the same whether he was Labour or Conservative—has a very difficult job to do, because resources are constrained. However, the reality is that any PCC has active choices. When they have active choices, they have to make an argument to the public about why they are taking the decisions that they are. In this case, he has active choices because there is more money in the West Midlands police system.

Again, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield is absolutely right: as a result of the funding settlement, which Labour voted against, there will be an additional £9.5 million for West Midlands police, which is a 1.8% increase. As has also been pointed out, West Midlands police has significant levels of reserves—more than £100 million as of March 2017, which is 20.2% of its total cash funding and five percentage points above the national average.
Here is the critical point, which has not yet been made: those reserves have increased by £26.9 million since 2011. That is the context for all this doom and gloom about savage cuts to West Midlands policing: the police and crime commissioner has increased his reserves by £26.9 million. One can do that only by not spending the money that one has been given by the taxpayer. The police and crime commissioner has active choices at this moment in time; it is disingenuous to pretend otherwise.

Mr Hurd: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Mitchell: The point about the reserves is incredibly important. It was made eloquently by the experienced Conservative town councillor in Sutton Coldfield, Councillor Ewan Mackey. The people of Sutton Coldfield demand an answer to the question—one of the three that I posed to the Minister—about why the reserves have had to be increased so much.

Mr Hurd: It is an active choice made by the police and crime commissioner. The irony of the situation is that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) were actually almost thoughtful on the point about the debate that can be had about the role of police stations in 21st-century, modern policing. I am talking about looking at the data about how the public actually use them and at the potential for mobile working. There is a debate and an argument to be had. It is not good enough to fog that out by simply blaming the Government.

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Mr Hurd: In that context, I would suggest to the police and crime commissioner that instead of blaming the Government and everyone else, he has to make an argument to the people whom he serves, and there is an argument to be made. The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Solihull and my hon. Friends the Members for Solihull and for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who have heard about Members of Parliament: my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield and my hon. Friends the Members for Solihull and for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), clearly, something has gone wrong in the process of consulting and engaging with the people whom the PCC represents.

My final point is about the consultation. I am arguing that the PCC has to take an argument to the public. There is an argument to be made about rationalising the police estate and about the role of police stations. It is not good enough to blame others. The PCC should make the argument and—I do not want to be accused of being tribalist, because that would be unfair—he might want to take a lesson from the Labour Mayor of London, who also went out to consultation on closing police stations. He made a complete hash of it, I would say, but to his credit and that of his office, when confronted with evidence of the hash they were making, he changed his mind. He planned, in my constituency, to close all police stations apart from one. Faced with the evidence that we presented about the folly and the lack of preparation, the Mayor has actually changed his mind and is re-consulting on Pinner, is keeping Ruislip station open and is working with Hillingdon on its plans to buy Uxbridge police station. He has been open-minded. That is a Labour Mayor of London—I do not want to be accused of being tribal—showing some genuine flexibility in the face of public opinion.

I have heard from my colleagues about the consultation. If the PCC has gone into the consultation in the way described—I have heard about Members of Parliament hearing things at second hand, from other people; I am hearing the words “zero engagement with people”; and I am hearing about a short consultation period—I suspect that he is going to fail on this, and therefore I would urge him to listen quite carefully to the people who represent the people whom he serves and to recognise that on the issue of people’s police stations, which is one of great sensitivity, he has not taken people with him. Therefore, I urge him to think again.

Jack Dromey: I am delighted to give way to the hon. Gentleman, who has been patient.

Jack Dromey: On accountability, which is very important, does the Minister accept responsibility for a funding settlement that will increase police funding by £450 million next year. That means that we will be spending £1 billion more next year on our police system than we were in 2015-16. It is a settlement that the hon. Gentleman and others voted against.

However, the point that I am trying to make in this debate is that I do not think that this is an issue about funding in the west midlands, because we are talking about relatively small sums of money in the context of an organisation with a budget of over half a billion pounds a year. I think that this is an issue of accountability and a flawed process of consultation with the people whom we serve and the police and crime commissioner serves. Therefore, I urge him to listen very carefully to the representations made by Conservative Members of Parliament: my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield and my hon. Friends the Members for Solihull and for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton). Clearly, something has gone wrong in the process of consulting and engaging with the people whom the PCC represents.

This matter should not be shrouded in tribal rhetoric about funding the police. Funding for West Midlands police has gone up. They are sitting on large reserves that have grown since 2011. There are active choices. In that context, the police and crime commissioner should show some respect to the people whom he serves and engage in a meaningful dialogue and engagement with the people on an issue on which they are clearly very sensitive.
5.25 pm

Julian Knight: I thank the Minister and, indeed, everyone who has spoken in a debate that has been interesting and, at times, quite feisty—that is right, because passions are running incredibly high. Police stations are hugely important to our communities. They are a focal point; they are a reassurance to our communities, and it is right that we look to defend them. At the same time, though, we must always be cognisant that there can be options whereby this can shift; things can change over time. I am very willing to talk with the police and crime commissioner properly about what we do with policing in Solihull.

However, as the Minister stated, there has been a failure of respect. That is such an apposite phrase—“a failure of respect”. That is what the consultation process has shown. The police and crime commissioner has made an active choice to close my constituency’s final police station—a police station in a borough of 200,000 people that will no longer have a police station because he has chosen to close it. He can make another choice today, after hearing this debate—to pause, to reflect, to consult properly and to use the reserves in order to have time so that he can properly map out for my constituents, and for all those who also face police station closures, what precisely he is going to do, rather than, frankly, relying on a wing and a prayer.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the proposed closure of police stations in Solihull and the West Midlands.

5.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 7 March 2018

[SIR DAVID CRAIGSBY in the Chair]

Misogyny as a Hate Crime

9.30 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered misogyny as a hate crime.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, in a debate on an issue that has been hotly discussed over the past couple of days. This debate is particularly timely, given that tomorrow is International Women’s Day. I pay tribute to the excellent work undertaken by the all-party parliamentary group on domestic violence and the Women and Equalities Committee, which have taken on important and often contentious issues to enhance the lives of all women up and down the country. Often, they have been supported by charities and think tanks such as the Fawcett Society, Women’s Aid and End Violence Against Women, which have contributed broader thoughts on policy relating to women. I thank them all for their work in this field.

All forms of abuse are committed disproportionately against women and girls, and the perpetrators are usually men. Violence against women and girls is part of what is stopping women achieving equality. Some 22% of girls aged seven to 12 have experienced jokes of a sexual nature from boys, and nearly three quarters of all 16 to 18-year-olds have experienced jokes of a sexual nature from boys, and nearly three quarters of all 16 to 18-year-olds have experienced jokes of a sexual nature from boys.

The APPG on domestic violence found that there is a clear link between low-level incidents of harassment towards women and more serious forms of violence and sexual crime. That is why I want the Government formally to extend the five strands of centrally monitored hate crime to include misogyny and provide for appropriate reflective sentencing. That would mean that incidents of street harassment, online abuse or other negative acts or behaviour directed towards a woman simply because she was a woman could be formally logged and monitored.

The debate is about securing an extension to the existing hate crime definitions and sentencing better to prevent violence against women, support early intervention against lower-level incidents and give women greater confidence in reporting the actions that, too often, have become the wallpaper of their lives. That is most certainly the case: 85% of women aged between 18 and 24 report that their concerns would be taken seriously. In evidence to the APPG on domestic violence, Women’s Aid said:

“Misogyny undermines the ability of targeted people to feel safe and secure in society.”

The increasing rates of violence, sexual violence, harassment and disproportionate online abuse towards women show that women are routinely seen as “other”. If we are genuinely to tackle the violence, we must address the root cause—inequality. That certainly seems to be what Baroness Williams of Trafford was hinting at when she said:

“The Government recognise that it is critical to look beyond criminal justice measures and also to focus on what we can do to prevent abuse and violence in the first place.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 22 November 2017; Vol. 787, c. 481.]

That is the challenge that five police forces around the country—most notably Nottinghamshire police—have set out to address. Their experience of piloting misogyny as a recordable hate crime has led to an increase in reporting.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I have been reading the press reports about this debate with some interest. In Nottinghamshire in 2014, Paddy Tipping presided over the first force to introduce such a crime. As a Nottinghamshire MP, I want to reassure hon. Members that in Nottinghamshire the world has not caved in—for from it. When misogyny and hate crime were included in the force victim satisfaction survey, 94% of victims said they felt reassured and confident in the police. In short, this has been a success.

Melanie Onn: It is welcome to hear that it has been a success. The police more widely do not seem to object to the extension of the definition of hate crime. The police are looking to the Government to support them.
in that action and to ensure that appropriate sentencing facilities are available to support any action they might take.

Contrary to media hype, there was not a surge of reports complaining of wolf-whistling, but arrests have been made for public order offences and actual bodily harm incidents that were classed as misogynist. That certainly reflects the experience of my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), who claims that the initiative has been a success. There are specially trained officers in place in a city that has two universities, and the change has made positive difference to women, who feel better able to report unwanted attention and receive appropriate support where necessary.

Ultimately, I hope that if we set our laws appropriately, there will be a reduced need for police intervention, because behaviour and culture will evolve to fit the new standard. Dame Lara Cox, who chaired the Fawcett Society discrimination law review, said:

“Laws are instruments in changing attitudes, setting the bar for expectations of treatment and behaviour”.

She made the point that our laws are not stagnant and that they must reflect the reality of today’s society.

The reality, as borne out by campaigns such as #EverydaySexism, #goodnightout, #girlsagainst and, more recently, #MeToo, as well as, internationally, #StopStreetHarassment, is that today’s society is awash with misogynistic acts such as groping, sexual comments, upskirting, revenge porn, sexual remarks, leering and stalking. As the nature of harassment changes, so must the laws that govern it, and too many incidents do not meet the criteria for assault, discrimination or public order offences.

The fact that I have had the temerity to call for this debate—this exploration of ideas—has provoked a backlash of vile fury. I have been told that I am in some way a man-hater, that I have no sense of humour and that I should most certainly learn to take a compliment. Because I am not a snowflake, as has been suggested, that has not dissuaded me from continuing to discuss these ideas, but it highlights why women and girls are so often put off from directly challenging behaviour at the time the incidents occur. They are put off from even reporting them, given that the potential response is so aggressive.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased that my hon. Friend has introduced the debate, not least because I am a strong defender of the reputation of men. Sexual harassment is not a given—people can choose not to do it—so it is really important in debates that we do not disrespect men by somehow suggesting that they are incapable of controlling their behaviour. I am pleased that she is setting out a way in which we do not make them feel unsafe or not secure in their environment and that they are not acceptable. The defence of some of that behaviour has been quite surprising.

Philip Davies: Will the hon. Lady give way again, just briefly?

Melanie Onn: I feel compelled to hear what the hon. Gentleman has to say.

Philip Davies: I apologise for interrupting the hon. Lady’s flow, but she just said something that made me think of something I had not expected to come to. Does she therefore think that her colleague, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), said about my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey) should be a crime?

Melanie Onn: Unless the hon. Gentleman is more specific, I cannot respond to that.

Philip Davies: At a political rally, the right hon. Gentleman repeated someone’s remark that my right hon. Friend should be lynched. Clearly, that made my right hon. Friend and other people feel very uncomfortable. Given what the hon. Lady is saying, does she think that should be a crime?

Melanie Onn: If the individual to whom the comments were directed felt that they wished to report that, it would fall within the scope of today’s discussion. Those sorts of comment are unnecessarily aggressive and there is no place for them, certainly not in the nature of political debate and discourse, but that has been explored extensively and more directly with the individuals concerned, who explained themselves as they wished to.

In the last few days, I have been told stories that have made me so sad, because after decades of talking about equality, we seem so far away from it when it comes to women and girls being targeted because of their gender. Twelve and 13 year-old girls in their school uniform can still be leered at and suggestive comments and actions made towards them. These are children, yet some people still consider that an appropriate course of action. Women in their 20s walking past pubs are routinely heckled and their appearance is audibly commented on. None of those so obviously charming men take the step of directly addressing the women. Why would they not want to talk to them? Because that would humanise the objects passing by who they seek to objectify in such an unfriendly and intimidating way?

If the statistics are anything to go by, nearly every woman will have a story of deliberately being made to feel uncomfortable or intimidated, or of being touched or the object of someone’s unwanted attentions, at the very least, and 90% of women in the UK experience threatening situations. If street harassment, abuse and continued sex discrimination have no place in our society, let us have laws that fully and properly reflect that. Let us set a bar for expected behaviour and proactively take steps to reduce violence and sexual crime against women.
Misogyny as a Hate Crime

9.44 am

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to be able to contribute to the debate, Sir David, and I apologise for having been a little late, due to the vagaries of the Victoria line. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) made a powerful speech and has campaigned powerfully on this issue.

Women in Walthamstow feel very strongly about the gauntlet that they too often have to run when they walk down some of our main streets where there are busy cafés and pubs, especially when the weather gets a little warmer. For many, it is a nightmare. As the first female MP for Walthamstow, I have received a deluge of emails from residents who say that they cannot walk down their streets and feel safe during the day time, let alone at night. We have campaigned about this problem for many years—I pay tribute to the Take Back the Streets group in Walthamstow. Literally, women cannot go about their business. This debate is fundamentally about freedom—the freedom for women to be able to use the spaces and places in our society just as equally as men do.

It is a sad fact that Hoe Street in Walthamstow is a gauntlet for women to walk down, especially on a warm and sunny day, and that in workplaces women do not always feel safe. As a society, that holds us all back. Half of women say that they have been sexually harassed at work; one in five regularly experiences sexual harassment on our streets. There is a day-to-day phobia of passing a group of men, although sometimes it is unfounded—I am sure that the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) wants me to point that out. But all too often, women know that as they walk past, they may be subject to touching; somebody may follow them; and somebody may try to engage them in a conversation, even when they have said no.

The other night, when I left Parliament I was followed down the street by a young man who would not take no for an answer—he kept trying to put his arms around me and touch me. Sadly, that is a day-to-day experience for too many women in our society. The trouble is that women are taught to minimise that behaviour—to brush it off, to somehow find a way of avoiding it, to feel that perhaps they should not be out on the streets late at night or that perhaps they should scream.

Sadly, it is part of our culture that someone feels they have the right to touch and to feel a woman at will. We need to change that. We know that 400,000 women were sexually assaulted in our country last year. That comes from being in a culture not of sex but of power. It is about entitlement. It is about the concept that a woman’s body is the primary thing of interest about her and therefore what matters is how men respond to it.

We should be very clear that this is #NotAllMen. What is so powerful about recognising misogyny as a hate crime is identifying that that is not normal human behaviour. It is not about men and women flirting with each other; it is not about men and women being able to banter with each other; it is not about men and women being able to ask each other out. Perhaps they exist in our society, but I have yet to meet a woman who went out with a man who followed her down the street and tried to put his hands on her bottom. It is about being able to say that this sort of behaviour is holding too many back in our society.

Let us look at the figures for sexual harassment of young women in our society: the figure of 50% of women experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace rises to 63% among 18 to 24-year-olds. That is a damning indictment of Britain in 2018 that a young woman cannot start her career without the fear that she might face groping in her workplace, unwanted sexual advances and being told that she cannot seek a promotion if she dares to say no. The #MeToo campaign in particular shows that that is widespread behaviour.

The good news for all of us is that the public are with us. In surveys about sexual harassment, 80% of the public recognise that harassment. No woman should have to fear when she gets on a tube train that the man opposite has a mobile phone with him and what he might try to do with it. Upskirting is a completely unacceptable form of harassment. It is an abuse of the power of a man to define what is important about a woman. No woman should be subject to groping of her breasts in the workplace, but we have seen those reports.

Through treating misogyny as a hate crime, we can change the conversation about what is acceptable. That is why I am such a fan of what has been done in Nottinghamshire and why I hope that the Mayor of London follows suit.

We women in Walthamstow know first hand how difficult that is. The honest truth is that when we started recording the spaces and places in our local community where women felt unsafe—where they could not walk past a particular pub or café without feeling attacked or being harassed—the police told us it was a cultural matter. They said we simply could not stop men hanging out together and that that was just what happened. As a big champion and a big respecter of men, I believe that is simply not the case. There is nothing that says that, when men get together, they have to harass women.

Importantly—I really hope the hon. Member for Shipley defends us and supports us in making this argument—making misogyny a hate crime is a way of clearly stating that. It is a way of standing up for men’s reputation and men’s right to be seen as equal citizens rather than as predators in waiting, by separating out unacceptable behaviour and recognising those men who abuse their power and strength. This is the difficult thing. People might think this debate is about jokes, but a rape joke is never funny, because it is always about the power imbalance. It is always about the possibility that someone might follow through and use their physical strength to pin you down—the possibility, when they follow you down the road, that they might follow you all the way home and force their way into your house. That is a threat that women often live with daily.

By categorising sexual harassment as a hate crime, we would change the conversation so that it was not about what women need to do to avoid it. I am sure many of us have been frustrated when police officers have suggested that women need to change their routes. I was furious when my local police suggested to girls at a local school, because we had had reports of someone flashing, that they needed not to travel home alone—that they needed to moderate their behaviour, rather than us needing to catch the man who was doing that. We must change the conversation and say, “Here are people committing a crime.”

We do not let the victim drive what we do about other crimes. We do not say when there is a burglary, “What really matters is that you have better locks on your house rather than that we find the persistent burglar in
this community," but all too often we do when it comes
to sexual harassment. We warn women to be careful
rather than finding the peepers and flashers. We warn
women about being alone at night rather than saying we
will put more police on the streets. We say that we
cannot tackle men’s behaviour rather than asking them
to change.

We have had a great experience in Walthamstow:
when we have gone in to talk to café and pub owners,
we have found that they want change, too. They recognise
that it is bad for their business to have a reputation for
being a hotspot for sexual harassment. They recognise
that their patrons’ behaviour might be inappropriate
and that that is bad for them. We have tried to use anti-
social behaviour legislation to challenge that behaviour
and to make those businesses take it seriously, but many of
them have risen to the challenge without being asked.

That is one of the important things about this
cornerstone and why, for too long, we have let hate
crime against women somehow be seen as hate crime
against any other protected characteristic. In having the
conversation, we have not spoken up for the best of
people or for the best of characteristics: treating one
other with respect. Respect is not just about being in a
workplace with a colleague without feeling the need to
touch their bosom; it is also about a man being able to
walk along the street with a woman and feel that she is
not frightened of him. Yet the honest truth for many
women is that if a man is walking behind us late at
night, many of us might stop, look at our phones or
cross the street. What a damning indictment it is of men
in our country that we are in a position where we feel
like that!

Making misogyny a hate crime would help us change
the conversation about men as much as it would help us
ensure that women are safe. I really hope that the
Government listen and work with police forces to get
this right. My biggest fear is that the police will say , as
they have said to me, “What would we do with all the
reports?” as though the problem is the amount of data
they have said to me, “What would we do with all the
reports?” as though the problem is the amount of data
that structure without fully reflecting on the fact that it
was created at a very misogynistic time and from a very
patriarchal perspective. There has been no recognition
that our economy and our work life completely fail to
address or even acknowledge the existence of things
such as period poverty and crippling painful menstrual
cycles, which are more common than most people think.
Until we accept and change the fact that everything
comes from a patriarchal perspective, we will always
struggle.

That brings me to the cultural side of this issue. It
feels like we are at a turning point with things such as
the “Time’s Up” movement. Frankly, the bravery of the
women who have come forward to talk about their
experience of abuse, sexism and misogyny, no matter
how small it may seem, is incredible. I cannot say it has
been positive in terms of moving us forward, but if we
have learned anything from all that, it is that these are
small occurrences. The downside to all this progress
is being faced with the reality that the women in my life,
whom I know and love, have been raped, beaten, assaulted,
called sluts and whores, and groped throughout their
lives, and they have been led to believe that that is
normal and is just a given—that it is just something that
happens and, like the hon. Member for Walthamstow
said, something that women should somehow deal with
or solve themselves.

Misogyny is absolutely everywhere in our society, to
the point that we often miss it because it has been so
normalised by being continually unchallenged. Some
talk will be uncomfortable with the graphic language
that I am about to use, but I am not going to dilute the
reality of such an important issue. I am used to online
abuse in particular. I am regularly called a wee boy, and
told that I wear my dad’s suits and stuff. Me and my
pals actually laugh about it. That is how I cope with it.
We find the best insults, and that is how we have a
laugh, but I struggle to see any joke in systematically
being called a dyke, a rug muncher, a slut, a whore and a
scruffy bint. I have been told, “You can’t put lipstick on
a pig,” and:

“Let the dirty bitch eat shit and die.”
I could soften some of this by talking about “the C-word”, but the reality is that there is no softening when I am targeted by these words: I am left reading them on my screen day in, day out. Someone said: “She needs a kick in the cunt.” I have been called “guttural cunt”, “ugly cunt” and “wee animal cunt”. There is no softening just how sexualised and misogynistic the abuse is. Some guy called William Hannah—I have never heard of him in my life—commented: “I’ve pumped some ugly burds in my time but I just wouldn’t”. I have been assured multiple times that I do not have to worry because I am so ugly that no one would want to rape me.

All those insults were tailored to me because I am a woman. We can kid ourselves that those are comments by a few bad, anonymous people on Twitter, but they are not: this is everyday language. I am aware that everyone here was uncomfortable hearing those insults—I felt uncomfortable reading them out—yet there are people who feel comfortable flinging those words around every day. When that language goes unchallenged, it becomes normalised, and that creates an environment that allows women to be subjected to a whole spectrum of abuse. I regularly see guys on Facebook talking about “getting pussy” and using other horrible words for women, but should we really expect any better given that the man sitting in the Oval Office thinks that it is okay to grab a woman by the pussy and faces no consequences?

Even in this place we need a bit of self-reflection. We are only starting to appreciate the full extent of the abuse and danger that women face on a daily basis, yet only a few weeks ago in the voting Lobby I was physically pressed up against a Member who has been accused of sexual misconduct, because there is so little room. That is not normal, and it is fair to say we should be looking at and talking about that. I am blessed in that I have the same right and influence as any elected man in this place, but what about all the female staff here who do not? Is that really the best example we can set for society? Surely it is something that we should at least be talking about.

As another personal example, I have been open in saying that I have been very unwell recently and was unable to travel and, therefore, vote. Like most people, I have no desire to disclose to the world the private, intimate and often embarrassing details that regularly come with illness. That is the business of my doctor, my Chief Whip and me—no one else—just as it would be in any other workplace with a line manager.

A fortnight ago, the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), alongside the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), suggested that I turn up for work more often, as I had a poor voting record. I responded to let them know I had been ill. I also pointed out the level of abuse and misinformation they were causing for me, but they stood by their comments. My Chief Whip wrote a letter to theirs, asking for an apology, retraction and correction, but there has been nothing, and still the abuse still comes my way daily. For two men to feel it is appropriate to chastise a female colleague publicly for a medical absence is bad enough, but knowingly to continue to misrepresent and cause abuse is frankly out of order. Judging by the House of Commons code of conduct, it qualifies as bullying, as it would in any other workplace.

Believe it or not, I have never lost sleep over the opinions of either of those hon. Gentlemen, and I have no intention of starting now. However, I am in a position to say something about it. What about the woman out there who has had a hysterectomy and is getting the same rubbish at her work? Or what about the woman with post-natal depression who has extra stress added on by having to put up with this kind of nonsense in her work?

Last year, the Fawcett Society launched a sex discrimination law review. It said: “The long-term aim is to nudge people towards a culture shift and to refrain misogynist behaviour as socially undesirable.” Perhaps it is time we assessed the example that we set, because if we cannot get our own House in order, how can we expect anyone out there to?

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David? I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) on securing this important debate, and all Members on the powerful words they have used. Unfortunately, I am not uncomfortable with the language used by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), because I, too, am normalised to hearing such words, as most people are in society.

Like many others who have spoken, I share the view that crimes motivated by prejudice and hostility should always be considered to be hate crimes. In England and Wales, we see hate crime figures increasing year on year, but that is partly due to better recording and an upsurge in victims coming forward. In 2016-17, more than 80,000 incidents were recorded when victims were considered to have been targeted because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or transgender identity.

What about the crimes committed as a result of hatred or prejudice against someone because of their gender? Surely sexual discrimination, violence against women and sexual objectification are all hate crimes. All too often, society and the legal system continue to trivialise such acts of abuse. There is a need for a long overdue change in the law so that misogynistic acts are treated as the serious hate crimes they actually are.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Will the hon. Lady join me in looking forward to the publication of Lord Bracadale’s review on hate crime legislation in Scotland, which is considering whether gender should be made a new category in hate crime?

Carolyn Harris: I welcome any information coming forward that helps us to hammer the point home.

The recent rise in cases of upskirting is a prime example of how these crimes are being played down. It is vital that such behaviour is seen for what it is. It is not a bit of fun or a harmless prank; it is humiliating for victims and a huge invasion of their privacy. It should be made illegal. [Interjection.] I apologise if I am echoing—that was me in stereo.

A recent sex discrimination law review by the Fawcett Society found that violence against women and girls is endemic in the UK, and it concluded that the legal system is failing these women and is in need of fundamental reform.
The evidence it gathered is deeply disturbing, highlighting that incidents of violence, abuse and harassment of women are increasing while access to justice for victims remains poor.

The review’s recommendations outlined a need to change the law so that women can be confident in reporting crimes against them. Women who have been raped should not be forced to divulge their own sexual history. Laws on sexual harassment in the workplace need to be strengthened to protect women from third parties, customers and service users, as well as from colleagues. Breaches of domestic abuse orders should be classed as criminal offences, and the definition of “revenge porn” needs reviewing and strengthening.

Any incident motivated by— or perceived to be motivated by—prejudice should be considered a hate crime. I welcome the progress we have seen in our legal system in recent years on the detection, reporting and prosecution of hate crimes based on the five current centrally monitored strands of race, religion, sexual orientation, disability and transgender identity. However, that progress also highlights the glaring omission of criminal offences motivated by other characteristics such as age and appearance, and specifically gender-based crime.

On appearance, I personally have become the subject of abuse purely because I am of a larger size and some people probably think I wear garish clothes. I feel comfortable in myself and my appearance, but others seem to take pleasure in homing in on the fact that I am not a size 8. That is their problem, not mine.

Some forces have already started to take action. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), in 2016 Nottinghamshire police extended its definition of hate crime to include misogynistic incidents for a two-month trial period. The success of that trial has not only seen it keep the trial in place but drawn interest from other forces around the country, including North Yorkshire police, who publicised in July 2017 its intention to record misogyny as a hate crime.

Despite that positive step forward, those local initiatives are just that—local, and not centrally monitored. We need amendments to existing legislation, or, at the very least, non-legislative changes to the list of centrally monitored hate crime characteristics to include sexual discrimination as the sixth strand. Misogyny is a hate crime. It is motivated by hostility, and it needs to be treated in exactly the same way as other hate crimes. It is now time for action, and time for victims to be given fair treatment.

10.8 am

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): I thank the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) for calling the debate, particularly as tomorrow we celebrate International Women’s Day, when I hope the House will have a long, thorough debate on the issues facing women—not just in this country, but across the world. One thing that, sadly, too few women across the world have is the right to participate in democratic processes. Today, we have seen how valuable the democratic processes of our country are. I hope very much that Back Benchers and those of us on the Front Benches do everything we can to safeguard the principles of democracy in this great country. [Interruption.] It appears that I am in stereo as well.

I am also feeling a little bit rebellious. Pretty much for the first time on Sunday, I went on a march—I am not a frequent participant: the March4Women. We were joined by up to 10,000 supporters, and we took over the streets, perhaps in a way that the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) would have liked. It was an incredible experience to feel that energy and positivity, but sadly some of the women and men on the march also felt anger about some of the issues we have been discussing today. Against that backdrop, I congratulate the hon. Member for Great Grimsby on securing this debate, and other hon. Members on participating. I hope that this will lead to a continuation of such debates over the year—this year of all years.

The hon. Lady used one phrase that very much stuck in my mind: she described the abuse faced by girls and women in the street or workplace as “the wallpaper of their lives”. I hope that we will get to a stage—sooner, rather than later—when that is no longer the case. The Government are clear that any crimes that target women, whether sexual offences, domestic abuse, or any other forms of abuse, are completely unacceptable and out of step with where we are as a society in 2018.

Since 2010 the Government have done more than ever to tackle these crimes, pledging £100 million over four years to support our ending violence against women and girls strategy, and committing to publish a landmark draft domestic abuse Bill. I hope that Members will use their networks to ensure a good response to the consultation when it is launched, and I am sure some of these issues will be raised during it. We play a leading role in the world in our response to violence against women and girls. We have introduced new offences for coercive and controlling behaviour, stalking, forced marriage and female genital mutilation. We have banned revenge porn, and only last month the Sentencing Council announced increased sentences for domestic abuse, in recognition of the seriousness of such crimes.

Sadly, we know that women and girls face harassment and abuse all too often, and understandably people are calling for action. This involves not just women and girls, but men as well: I feel obliged to remind Members, in the heat of this issue and debate, that most men behave with decency, propriety and respect towards women. However, they are not the men we are worrying about in this debate, and today we want to focus on those who fall outside the majority and treat women in a disrespectful or abusive way.

Melanie Onn: I entirely support what the Minister is saying, and I feel strongly that men have a critical role in setting a positive example for young men who are growing up. I went running with my son, and someone in a van decided to beep as they drove past and shout something out of the window. My son was confused by that, and wanted to know what it was all about. I did not know where to start—I do not want to introduce the idea that such things are a common form of behaviour. The Minister is right in what she says, and I applaud her for setting it out so clearly.

Victoria Atkins: Indeed, and sometimes men can be the best feminists of all. My little boy is growing up thinking that of course women are Members of Parliament,
and of course they are Prime Ministers, because that is what he understands at the moment. The value of men in this debate is important and we all have supportive male colleagues. If we are honest, none of us—or very few of us—could do the amazing job of representing our constituencies in the House of Commons without support networks. Those networks could be male, female or whatever, but we need people behind us—our family and friends—to support us in this role. Men have a vital role in this debate.

Let me turn to current hate crime provisions; if I may, I will be quite detailed in my response on the law because we must take this issue step by step. Currently, specific hate crime provisions, including aggravated and incitement offences, and aggravated sentence uplift, are for offences that target race, religion, sexual orientation, disability and transgender identity. Hate crimes are motivated by hostility or prejudice against a person on the basis of one or more of those five strands. It is a fundamental aspect of the legislation that those motivations can be proven to demonstrate the hate element, including where that leads to sentences being increased.

At the moment we have no clear evidence to show the extent to which the range of crimes committed against women and girls are specifically motivated by misogyny, which is defined as “the dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women.”

The police pilots that have been mentioned in this debate are of great interest to the Government. As the hon. Member for Great Grimsby said, there are pilot areas across the country, including in Nottinghamshire, where it has been led by Sue Fish, the former chief constable of Nottinghamshire police. That approach has been used to help give women confidence to come forward to the police to report incidents, and to raise the priority of investigations and enhance support offered to women and girls. There has been positive early feedback from women and girls, and those who support them, which is why the National Police Chiefs’ Council is gathering more data on those local initiatives. We will ask the police to feed back on the results of any pilots such as that in Nottinghamshire in recording misogyny as a hate crime.

However, we must be careful about creating laws that would inadvertently conflict with principles of equality. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) is no longer in his place, but he raised a point about misogyny as a hate crime. Under the Equalities Act 2010, certainly in the workplace we must balance the issue of equality. For example, our laws on religious hate crime provide equal protection for people of all faiths and of none. Equality of protection is a crucial element of ensuring equal protection for people of all faiths and of none.

For example, our laws on religious hate crime provide specific hate crime provisions, including aggravated and aggravated sentence uplift, are necessary. If we were to have hate crime in relation to gender, we would have to think carefully about whether that would apply to the entire population or just to half of it.

Melanie Onn: Rather than considering the barriers, I strongly request that the route to overcoming potential obstacles requires the intent of securing misogyny as an extension to the categorisations as its ultimate aim. Although issues may present themselves, I am sure the Minister has flexed her intellectual muscles on more complex issues than this, and I hope she will apply similar rigour to achieving something that fundamentally could be really positive for our society.

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. I am setting out these points because one’s instinctive reaction might be, “Yeah, let’s go for it”. But we must be mindful of unintended and inadvertent consequences. I wonder whether hate crime legislation is definitively the best way to treat these crimes. Women are not a minority, and I would be hesitant to put us forward as one.

Perhaps I am a little more robust in the way that I would like this abuse and harassment to be treated. Within equalities legislation, it is being a minority covered by the five strands that causes something to fall under hate crime legislation. I see that the hon. Member for Walthamstow is perched on her seat.

Stella Creasy: We must be very careful when we talk about being “robust”, because we are putting this back on to women and how they manage these experiences, rather than challenging the behaviour. The Minister says that this is about being a minority, but the disproportionate balance of power in our society means that one “minority”—men—have disproportionate power over women.

These incidents are about the abuse of that power, just as we see the abuse of people on the basis of their religious characteristics or ethnic identity. I do not think the Minister’s minority/majority point is robust enough to defend not looking at whether, if we were to categorise misogyny as a hate crime, that would recognise fully the protected characteristic that we are seeking to include.

Victoria Atkins: I am so glad that the hon. Lady clarified that. I was not for a moment suggesting that women themselves must be more robust in the way they deal with such things. That is not my intention. I am saying that we as a society should be more robust.

It comes down to attitudes—something that has been raised a great deal in the debate. I am treading carefully at the moment with respect to equalities legislation because, as far as inserting anything into the current hate crime provisions is concerned, there are legal wrangles that we have to consider. We want to ensure that any changes that we make in the law to reflect the abuse in question would not have any impact on the five protected strands—of religion, and so on.

Melanie Onn: I thank the Minister for being generous in taking interventions. Does her concern about including misogyny in the legislative framework call into question the existing extensions, and what police forces are doing?

Victoria Atkins: No. At the moment we do not have any clear evidence and, as I have said, we welcome the evidence from the pilot projects. However, the practical legislative steps are what we must put our mind to—as we are doing. I am flagging them up as issues that we shall have to settle one way or another.

For example, there are high rates of under-reporting of the existing five strands of hate crime. We would not want to remove the focus from them, because we want to encourage more people to report that they have been
abused racially or because of their religion. Perhaps the best way I can sum up our position is to say that the Government are listening.

There have been calls from both sides of the Chamber for a change in attitudes. When I practised at the criminal Bar, I used to say that by the time things have got to court the harm has been done, and it would be much better if they did not happen in the first place. We all need to challenge the attitudes that normalise or excuse the abuse and harassment of women. We have had examples today of the abuse that colleagues have, sadly, faced in their professional lives. I commend their calling out those instances of abuse. Perhaps I may say that I constantly admire the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for the beautiful necklaces that she always wears, and I do not understand why anyone would feel they had reason to make any criticism about that.

The Government Equalities Office is taking forward a programme of work to identify and challenge harmful social norms, ensuring that men and boys are included in the conversation as well as women. We need to ensure that all children grow up understanding that we should all be treated with respect, and not abused on the basis of gender, race or religion, and so on. Working with the Advertising Association, we have provided teachers and parents with resources to improve primary school children’s resilience with respect to harmful gender stereotypes. In addition, following on from the successful “This is abuse” campaign—and it was successful in teaching people about what constitutes an abusive relationship and what should be normal and acceptable in a loving relationship—the Home Office and the Government Equalities Office have provided £3 million in the past year to develop and run a new “Disrespect NoBody” campaign, to tackle abuse within teenage relationships and encourage teens to rethink their views on violence, controlling behaviour and the meaning of consent in relationships.

Modern life can impinge on those matters as well, in the form of sexting and so on. We are also engaging with young people on questions of respect and equality to prevent such behaviour in the first place. That is why we have committed to making relationships education mandatory in all primary schools, and relationships and sex education mandatory in all primary schools from September next year.

Stella Creasy: I completely agree about the importance of getting sex and relationships education into every school. It is age-appropriate and sensitively done, so does the Minister share my concern that parental withdrawal might undermine the principle of giving every young person the best start in life and the best values about how we should treat each other?

Victoria Atkins: I must admit I am naturally cautious about the state interfering—or rather, because “interfering” is too pejorative a term, about the reach of the state into family life. Of course it is justified on occasion, but at the moment I do not have enough evidence to suggest that the rate of withdrawal would be very high; we simply do not know at the moment. Also, we should try to take parents with us. There is a lack of understanding about the education intended for primary school children about relationships and respect. We need to explain that more, so that when children start to receive that education people understand the boundaries of what their seven, eight or nine-year-old will hear in school. I would naturally just pause before setting out such legislation to make it mandatory, before we have evidence about how many families are going to withdraw.

To move on to the legal framework, there are of course criminal laws that prohibit sexual harassment, assault and rape. They include the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, which could cover sexual harassment, as well as the Sexual Offences Act 2003 and the Public Order Act 1986. We want women to know that those protections are there for them in law. It is also vital that when women and girls report their experiences they feel that they are treated with dignity and respect. We have recognised in our violence against women and girls strategy the gendered nature of crimes such as domestic abuse, sexual violence, so-called honour-based violence and stalking. As I have said, we have committed more than £100 million over this spending review period for critical services for victims of those crimes. We are committed to ensuring that victims of sexual assault have access to the specialist support that they need. We are also ensuring that the police and Crown Prosecution Service use the powers that they have to charge and prosecute for the abhorrent practice of upskirting. We are reviewing those powers to ensure that they are still fit for purpose.

Laws need to keep pace with modern life—and upskirting is, indeed, an example of that. We are determined that the internet should not be a safe place for those who carry out threatening or abusive behaviour online, whoever is being targeted. The Government are clear that what is illegal offline is illegal online.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister is being generous in giving way. I apologise for not being here earlier, as I was in Committee. She will be aware of Amnesty International’s research into abuse of female MPs, which was published last year when I, along with the Home Secretary and the shadow Home Secretary, were listed among the most abused UK female MPs. A lot of that abuse is misogynistic. What are the Government doing to address the abuse that is directed towards female MPs? We all know that the shadow Home Secretary gets by far the worst of it, but as the second most abused female MP in the UK I find the degree of homophobia, misogyny and anti-Catholic abuse that I must tolerate online quite shocking.

Victoria Atkins: That is disgraceful to hear. It comes to something, does it not, when colleagues have a league table of the people who receive the most abuse? It is a sorry sign, and the Prime Minister is absolutely committed to tackling the problem. The hon. and learned Lady may recall that on the day of the centenary of women’s suffrage, the Prime Minister announced that we have commissioned the Law Commission to launch a review of the current legislation on offensive online communications to ensure that laws are up to date with technology. We have tackled the question of the treatment of women in public life—it is not just women Members in this place; we know that women who have any sort of high profile, whether through business, television or whatever, sadly get their share of abuse.
I was rather surprised when I gave an interview on that day and the person interviewing me asked me why I was not on Twitter. I said, very matter-of-factly, “I came off it because I got fed up with the abuse.” I thought no more of it; I did it quite some time ago. That seemed to attract attention. The reason I raise it is that I would like to emphasise to anyone who may be thinking of standing for public life that they do not have to be on Twitter if they do not want to be. If they want to be, fine, but equally it is not mandatory to be on Twitter if they do not want that side of things. There are other social media platforms, all of which I am sure everyone is very aware of.

Joanna Cherry: I take the Minister’s point that nobody has to be on Twitter, but does she agree with me that women in all walks of life should not feel forced off Twitter because they are abused simply for having the effrontery to hold a view and to articulate it?

Victoria Atkins: I would not describe myself as feeling forced to leave Twitter; I just took the decision. That is the point I am trying to get across. We are all trying, on a cross-party basis, to attract more women into politics. There is a great campaign called 50:50 Parliament, which is encouraging more women to stand, not just in national Parliament but in local councils and so on. I am just saying that there are many ways of doing this job, and it is one’s own choice.

Mhairi Black: I completely appreciate the point the Minister is making, and I have done the same thing; I have been on Twitter and said, “Oh, I can’t be bothered with that,” and I have put my phone away and not looked at it for a couple of weeks. That is fine, but the reality is that all the views are still there, whether or not I am online and looking at them. Whether or not we use Twitter, the vast majority of the public do. As long as they are in a sphere where that kind of stuff is acceptable and completely without consequences, our coming off Twitter does not solve anything.

Victoria Atkins: Of course, social media and the tech companies are coming under a lot of attention at the moment for the way in which they are reacting not just to abuse online, but to the fact that criminals are using social media networks for horrific crimes such as child sexual exploitation and terrorist offences. As I see it, if we are not on the cusp of revolution, it feels as though we are perhaps beginning the beginning of the cusp of a revolution, in that we have got to a stage where we expect more from the people who run those big companies and have such a sway over our day-to-day lives.

Mhairi Black: Is that not where Government step in and we lead by example? If we are able to say to the tech companies that we think they should be doing more to clamp down on such views, and if we, as the leaders of society, are looking at this cultural and structural problem and seeing that our society is poisoned with this stuff just now, it is on us to do something about it. It is not just for the Twitter and Facebook giants; it is on us.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady will know that the Government are taking the issue seriously, particularly in the areas of counter-terrorism and the sexual exploitation not just of children, but of women. We are taking it very seriously. Indeed, I was at a conference of the global partnership to end violence against children last month in Sweden. I was there to explain what the United Kingdom is doing to support the WePROTECT global alliance. That is an extraordinary, groundbreaking global alliance of Governments to tackle online child sexual exploitation; as we know, there are no geographical boundaries to it. I think I am right in saying that we are the highest contributor to the scheme, with £50 million, and we are doing some groundbreaking stuff on programmes that are creeping through the net and getting to the sites that are sharing the most appalling images.

Angela Crawley: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: Will the hon. Lady forgive me? I am conscious that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby will want to respond, and I have two more pages, which may take me a couple of minutes.

On the issue of the internet, we have also published the internet safety strategy Green Paper to look at ways of tackling online abuse and harassment where they fall short of a criminal offence, such as, in some cases, trolling. That includes a commitment to introduce a voluntary social media code of practice. In addition, since 2015 we have introduced strong legislation to address revenge pornography—another way in which women can be humiliated online and have their lives affected by relationships that have since ended—and the helpline we funded has received more than 6,000 calls since 2015.

I thank the hon. Member for Great Grimsby for calling this debate. I will end on a positive note: this is the centenary of women’s suffrage, and I have promised friends and family that by the end of the year they will be thoroughly fed up with me using the phrase “Ask her to stand”. We have seen today in the Chamber the impact that women standing up and speaking on issues that matter to them and to their constituents can have. I am sure I am not alone in hoping that through this debate and our cross-party activities this year, we will encourage more women to stand not just for the House of Commons but for local government, local councils and devolved Assemblies and Parliaments. If more women stand for elected office to talk about and campaign on issues that they care about, they will make a difference. I will end with my hashtag, #askhertostand.

10.37 am

Melanie Onn: I thank the Minister for her very detailed and considered response. I genuinely urge her to take the points I have made seriously; they were made in good faith. I was determined to ensure that this debate would not be trivialised or minimised, and I tried as much as possible not to make it about us, because the issues that affect so many women in all our constituencies on a regular basis—from a very young age, which gives me such cause for concern—are important and should be at the forefront of our thoughts at all times.

This is a really important issue. It might start at the level of street harassment, but too often it ends up in much more serious offences. I have just been looking at my Twitter feed—perhaps I should come off it—and I
is now filled with comments asking if I have nothing better to do and whether there are not more pressing issues facing my constituents that I should be tackling. In my constituency we have an excessively high rate of domestic violence, and there are children in primary and secondary school who accept that violence in a relationship is somehow normal and to be expected. If, by challenging the acceptability of those attitudes, I can do anything to nip in the bud the extension of low-level abuse leading to more serious harassment, I will consider my time and Parliament’s time very well spent. If that makes women come forward to report more incidents, it is certainly the right thing to do.

I want to come back on the Minister’s point about the numerical minority of women. I suggest that the power imbalance in society leaves women in a minority position, whether that be in terms of equal pay, membership of company boards or our experience of harassment and abuse, which the statistics bear out. We are always put in a minority position, even if our numbers do not indicate that we should be.

On the points about existing legislation, so often the thresholds are not met and the police do not feel confident about taking forward cases. That leaves women feeling that they should not report, because the crimes are not deemed to be serious enough and insufficient action is taken as a result. It is clear to me from the testimony in the contributions that we have heard today that we must do all that we can to try to tackle the culture and attitude that seem so pervasive in society today. Until we do that, we will not start to see the positive impact that the Minister is working so valiantly towards achieving when it comes to much more serious crimes, such as domestic violence and rape. I thank her very much for her consideration and thank everyone for their contributions, which are very much appreciated.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered misogyny as a hate crime.

10.41 am

Sitting suspended.

Fairly Traded Goods

10.58 am

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for fairly traded goods.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and to be the standard bearer for fair trade in Fairtrade fortnight. I do that as a proud Co-operative and Labour, as well as Welsh, MP.

Ten years ago, Wales became the first fair trade nation in the world. Swansea is a fair trade city. Four out of five local authorities in Wales are fair trade, as are all the churches and 150 of the schools, which represents 20% of the stock of fair trade schools in Britain. We take fair trade very seriously in Wales, as do others, because the world trading system is rigged in favour of the more powerful players, be they multinationals or big countries, arranging trade agreements in their own interest. As the Minister knows, fair trade is about giving a fair price, fair living standards and sustainable situations for smaller producers in Fairtrade-accredited industries.

People will know about the example of bananas. I am sure that, like me, you enjoy a banana, Sir David. Bananas are the most popular fruit in Britain and around 6 billion are consumed here each year. Fairtrade bananas, which are now commonplace in supermarkets, show that the right price is paid. That is translated into working conditions, living wages, the permission to have organisational safety standards and, often, a Fairtrade premium, which can be invested in schools and education. Fairtrade farmers say that that generally increases their income by 34%.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this issue forward. Does he agree that this £2 billion annual enterprise does so much good and that the message must be sent that an extra 5p or 10p for a fair trade product does not make any difference to us in this country, but means life or death for the farmer, who is getting a fair price for his goods, so we do not mind paying that?

Geraint Davies: I very much agree. A small increment in the price in the supermarket makes a massive difference to the take-home pay of the producers, who are often exploited. The hon. Gentleman knows that a third of the world’s population live on less than $1 a day. We must ask, who are those people? How can we help them? How significant is that help? A few pence on the price of a banana makes a massive difference.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, and I congratulate him on securing the debate. It is Fairtrade fortnight, which presents a fantastic opportunity relating to his point about knowing who benefits. I congratulate the Fairtrade Foundation and others that host fair trade producers in the UK so that those producers can share their stories. Those stories are incredibly powerful and bring fair trade to life for lots of consumers in the UK. As much of that work that we can do, the better. It really does bring this issue to life for people.
Geraint Davies: I agree with my hon. Friend. We can do a lot in this place to secure and augment fair trade through our trade negotiations, but ultimately consumer power is what really puts pressure on politicians and on producers to produce fairly. People understanding their choice about a product makes a real difference at the coalface, the banana plantation, the tea plantation or whatever. When people make those choices, they make a difference. In turn, producers will change their minds and Governments will listen. Those organisations, keeping hope alive, keeping the campaign going and awareness are all crucial to create a better world, which otherwise will be naturally fixed in favour of the larger, more powerful players.

I am not going to go through all the markets, as time does not permit, but people will be familiar with gold, which symbolises love, power and wealth, but not for the people producing it. They may be in appalling conditions and having to use mercury and other toxic and hazardous products to process that gold. Therefore, it is important to have minimum prices, living wages and environmental conditions such as clean air. Those are underpinned by fair trade standards and are, again, why fair trade is so important.

I am a Member for the Co-operative party—a big group in Parliament. From the outset, the Co-op party has been instrumental in changing the way businesses are delivered in the interests of both workers and consumers. It has been a pioneer of the fair trade movement and wants to see it going forward. I am proud of that and want the Government to encourage more co-operatives alongside fairer trade.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case for fair trade. Will he join me in recognising the important role of local groups, such as those in Selkirk and Melrose in my constituency, which do so much to promote fair trade? I will visit Selkirk’s Fairtrade pop-up shop on Friday, which will be promoting Fairtrade products. In addition, young people play an important role in educating society and the wider community about the importance of fair trade. Does he agree that young people are the great champions and ambassadors of fair trade and should be encouraged?

Geraint Davies: I completely agree. I support the local initiatives that the hon. Gentleman mentioned and the granular approach to fair trade. Ultimately, we as individuals, buying bananas, coffee, gold or whatever, will have a direct impact on the livelihoods of small families producing those products elsewhere.

As the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) suggested, young people with their lives ahead of them often think about what is right and wrong in this world, and think, “How can I affect that? Am I powerless and therefore disinterested in the political process?” They want to engage in this sort of thing both politically and in the choices they make, the people they talk to and how they influence their family and community. It is imperative that we have consumer push, as well as policy direction, to deliver fairer trade. Those will be alongside the powers in the marketplace that are honing down to stop that happening, in the interests of pure profit and cost reduction—but consumers can often afford to pay these prices.

The nub of the issue is that, in every probability, we are approaching Brexit. How will our trade arrangements be made? Can we sustain, enhance and build on what we have done with fair trade, or do we face real pressures to be like Oliver Twist in our global trading position and say, “Can I have some more?”, while turning our back on Europe? The reality is that Europe has high terms of reference in trade. I would like assurance from the Minister that we expect our future trade relations at least to match what the European Union enjoys in ensuring sustainable, environmentally friendly and fair trade in its dealings.

There are concerns that we will be under pressure from the United States, which has become more protectionist with its talk about tariffs, or big players such as the Chinese. We need assurances in black and white in the Trade Bill and the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill that we will keep the highest standards in our trading agreements. For that, transparency, scrutiny and agreement of future trade agreements are required so that people can rest assured that environmental standards, human rights and living standards will be protected to a minimum guaranteed level.

I am interested to hear the Minister’s comments on how we can ensure that the value and volume of fair trade that we import to Britain are at least sustained, and ideally grown. What mechanisms can we use to sustain those, rather than just hoping for the best?

There are concerns from the Fairtrade Foundation and the Trade Justice Movement, which said that the current situation is not fit for purpose. We face an opportunity for more transparency, more scrutiny and more assurances on fair trade, with a view to helping environmental sustainability, sustaining human rights, rather than making them worse, and meeting our sustainable development goals. I would be grateful for the Minister’s assurances on that.

As we move towards Brexit and turn our back on the EU marketplace, I fear that we will be hobbled because of economic pressures and that we will not be as able to take global leadership in this area. Places around the world, including the Commonwealth, have historically seen Britain as a trading pioneer that has set standards for an environmentally and morally—in terms of living standards—sustainable world. We need to have down in black and white the ways in which we will ensure that we keep those high standards in future.

I intend to table amendments to the Trade Bill to ask for scrutiny and for assurance that the minimum trading standards that we enjoy in the EU will be sustained, which would mean that we could all look forward to a fairer, more equal world as trade inevitably increased and that the poorest families would benefit from trade, rather than inequality growing in the world we share.

11.10 am

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) on securing this important debate during Fairtrade fortnight about the valuable role that Fairtrade plays for us as consumers. It is a familiar, well-known brand that we all recognise, including children choosing bananas in the supermarket. Many years of work have gone into building up the brand.
It is wonderful to see the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Fairtrade, the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). The all-party group plays an important role in keeping that valued brand at the forefront of our minds during Fairtrade fortnight.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Before I was elected to this place, I was proud to bring a motion to my borough council to make Ipswich a Fairtrade town. Does the Minister agree that having Fairtrade councils that lead at the forefront through education will have a greater impact on consumer behaviour than if we leave it up to advertisers and individuals?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman gives an important example of the valuable role that local councils and councillors can play. Parliament is also involved in promoting Fairtrade goods. It was wonderful to hear from the hon. Member for Swansea West about the remarkable example of support for Fairtrade from people across Wales.

I very much welcome Fairtrade fortnight, which is a fantastic opportunity for UK consumers and businesses to stand together to emphasise the important link between what we consume in the UK and the farmers and workers who grow our food produce, and to show our support for fairly traded goods.

Geraint Davies: I am grateful for what the Minister said about Wales. Does she agree that it is imperative to ensure that consumers across Britain know when they are buying Fairtrade goods and to highlight the fact that those choices exist, from the Government’s point of view? That would put further pressure on producers. We do not want a situation where people do not realise they have Fairtrade options and so cannot make the positive choices that influence producers and the end result. Will she do everything she can to ensure that everybody knows what they are eating and that those choices exist?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman is right, and he rightly uses his position and this fortnight to make the point across the United Kingdom about the valuable Fairtrade brand—obviously, other approaches are available, as they say on the BBC about particular products.

Fairtrade has done a tremendous job of instilling its brand in the mind of the British consumer; the UK leads other markets around the world on recognition of that brand, although it is recognised in other countries. Fairtrade shows us real examples of the links between workers and consumers, which is very powerful.

Geraint Davies: What does the Minister think about the danger of the Fairtrade brand being undermined by half-weight replicas when companies say, “Oh, this is sort of fair”? There is confusion because we know what the Fairtrade brand delivers and we want that to grow, but if companies that are not properly Fairtrade have something that sounds a bit like it, and consumers think, “That sounds all right,” that is a worry—it is Fairtrade-lite.

Harriett Baldwin: I think the hon. Gentleman is indirectly alluding to another major supermarket that came up with a different approach. He will be aware that the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) has been in touch with the Advertising Standards Authority and that it ruled on the situation today. I will not dwell on that, because it is a matter for the Advertising Standards Authority, but I join him in celebrating the fact that the Fairtrade brand has stood the test of time. As consumers, we all know and understand it. I welcome his championing of that. It is also important that, as a Labour and Co-operative MP, he highlights the work that the Co-op does in stocking Fairtrade brands.

I am happy to highlight the work that the Department has done over a long period to support Fairtrade and the principles it stands for of free, fair and inclusive trade. It is one of the cornerstones of our economic development strategy, which sets out our plans to promote economic growth and decent jobs worldwide, and ultimately to build a safer, healthier, more prosperous world. To do that, and to achieve those really stretching sustainable development goals by 2030, we will need to continue to work in partnership with businesses, non-governmental organisations, producers and consumers on the important agenda that the hon. Gentleman highlights.

The UK public have demonstrated enormous commitment to Fairtrade, not only in Wales but across the land. There are some 600 Fairtrade communities—including Ipswich, as we heard—and 1,000 Fairtrade academic institutions that help to promote the message. In 2016, the Fairtrade market in the UK generated £32.3 million in premiums, which is money that goes directly to farmers and workers in developing countries. Those communities lead on what the money is spent on, which empowers workers to decide what their priorities are. Last night, I had the privilege of meeting Ketra, a coffee farmer from Uganda, who pointed to the improvements that have occurred over time in her community as a result of that premium.

Fairtrade plays a vital role in ensuring that the rights of workers at the bottom of the supply chain are recognised—an important issue that the hon. Gentleman highlighted—and that businesses have the tools to prevent and stop exploitation. The Government are fully committed to supporting that through the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

Holly Lynch: The Minister is being very generous with her time. When the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) was Secretary of State, I met her to talk about the Fairtrade principles. One of the most exploitative industries around the world is mining—a point made powerfully by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies). Fairtrade Gold has done some fantastic work in the industry, and the former Secretary of State was interested in liaising with the Fairtrade Foundation to see what more DFID could do to apply Fairtrade principles to mining around the world. Will the Minister update us on whether that appetite is still there and whether there have been any new developments?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady raises a really important point that applies not only to gold, but to so many other minerals; some of the working conditions for people in the cobalt industry are absolutely scandalous. I will follow up on her point and elaborate more on what we are doing, because she makes a very powerful suggestion. When we buy phones, for example, we should know that the minerals in them have been mined in good working conditions.
We are working with Fairtrade to develop Fairtrace, a new supply chain mapping tool for cocoa, coffee and tea that will help UK brands and consumers to better understand where their products come from. Companies that have gone through the Fairtrace process include the Co-op and Ben and Jerry’s.

We face many great challenges. More than 40 million men, women and children are working in conditions of modern slavery around the world—a statistic that I find absolutely startling. We cannot help to lift millions of people in the developing world out of poverty without tackling the exploitation of workers in global supply chains. This debate has rightly brought gold and mined metals to the fore. Clearly, more trade on fair terms is the key engine for poverty reduction. Through fair trade, we can increase trade and create a progressive trade policy that increases prosperity for all, acts as a lever for equality and leaves no-one behind.

Geraint Davies: Perhaps the Minister was about to answer this, but what red lines and constraints are the Government planning to put in trade deals? Obviously transparency and scrutiny are a different issue, but what is the plan to discourage trade with those who exploit the 40 million people in modern slavery?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, although I have to say that I disagree with his party’s stance on the customs union because it is really important that as we leave the European Union we can work through trade issues as a sovereign nation. DFID is working closely with the Department for International Trade to ensure that development and global prosperity are at the heart of UK trade and investment policy. Our focus is on helping countries in the developing world to leave their aid dependency behind and become our trade partners of the future. Our key priority is to ensure that our trading relationships with developing countries are not disrupted by our choice to leave the European Union.

We are working to ensure continuity in our relationships with approximately 100 developing countries, which will provide a strong platform to deepen trade and investment partnerships. We are supporting developing countries to take better advantage of trading opportunities. We will build on our track record as a champion of trade and development by offering an integrated trade and development package that improves our trade offer to developing countries. We are fully committed to ensuring the maintenance of high standards of consumer, worker and environmental protection in all our trade agreements. I hope that that statement reassures the hon. Gentleman.

Geraint Davies: The Minister is being very generous with her time. Will data be available to show that we are increasing our focus on the value and volume of fair trade? We need examples of products that have been traced back to their origin to show that they do not come from circumstances of exploitation. I hope she shares my ambition, because the public want to know that they are buying better products from fairer trade. There is an onus on the Government to provide that information and encourage that practice. Can she say anything else about her work with the Department for International Trade to ensure that those values are instilled in trade deals?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman raises data. He will be aware of how protracted the process is; he will also be aware of DFID’s commitment to the Fairtrace process that I outlined, which is very much about ensuring we have data that companies can work through with their supply chains.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Commonwealth. I am very much looking forward to the opportunities that will arise from our hosting the forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government summit, the theme of which is “Towards a Common Future”. We will really be able to emphasise inclusive, fair trade, and it will be a great opportunity to hear developing country perspectives and drive forward this important agenda. More than a million Fairtrade farmers and workers live in Commonwealth countries; through a fair and transparent trade system, we can secure a more prosperous future for them and for everyone in the Commonwealth.

The Government will continue to champion trade that is free and fair and that helps to tackle the exploitation of workers; create a trade system that works for everyone, including the very poorest; and eliminate poverty through inclusive economic growth.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.
Local Museums

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered local museums. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main.

I should perhaps explain the genesis of the debate to Members, as many people have asked me why I want to raise this interesting subject. Two months ago, there was a threat to one of the local museums in my constituency—a council-supported museum. The Stirling Smith was threatened with closure following the publication of proposals by the local authority to remove its budget over the next five years. In fact, some Members might have signed my early-day motion to bring pressure to bear. That pressure was ultimately successful, because in addition to the actions of hon. Members in this House there was a huge public petition and the council decided not to remove funding from the Stirling Smith, which was a good decision.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for securing this important debate. On the issue of local authority-funded museums, does he agree that it is concerning that 39% of them have seen funding cut and 85% have cut their hours? Obviously, that will have a knock-on effect on the wonderful services they provide, such as those provided by the Elsecar Heritage Centre in my constituency in Barnsley.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention and if she will bear with me, I shall come to that very subject later in my speech.

I believe that it is time for the House to consider the impact that local museums have on our country and our local communities. A lot of major issues affect our museums and I will speak about a number of them today. I also look forward to hearing other Members from across the United Kingdom talk about their local museums; in Stirling, we have a number.

When the art gallery at the Stirling Smith was threatened, I dropped in to speak to the director of the museum, Mr Kerr, can we keep interventions brief? Thank you.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) for her intervention and for highlighting that issue. Of course, she highlights the importance of the heritage that our museums represent, but they represent much more. In Stirling, we have a number of museums. The Stirling Smith is the principal museum of the city, but we also have the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Museum in Stirling castle, the Dunblane Museum and a number of other smaller museums. That is alongside the major tourist attractions that we have in Stirling, such as Stirling castle itself, which is also home to the famous and internationally important Stirling heads.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): In Hartlepool, we have a local museum, which is the Royal Navy museum of the north, and a volunteer-run museum at the Heugh battery on the Headland. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that such independent museums are important to the local economy and the tourist industry?

Stephen Kerr: Those museums absolutely are important. Museums such as the one the hon. Gentleman refers to would like us to be able to do more to celebrate them, but lottery cash needs to go to towns as well, so that we can celebrate and our museums play an important part in preserving, archiving and displaying it.

The battle of Bannockburn visitor centre tells visitors about the most important battle in the history of Scotland, and perhaps of England. There is also the national Wallace monument, which holds William Wallace’s original sword. The sword is an impressive sight, standing some 5 feet 4 inches high. The Secretary of State for Defence visited my constituency recently and I took him on a little tour. We passed by the field of the battle of Bannockburn and I told him about what had happened there, and then we passed by Stirling bridge, and I told him about what had happened there. He said, “Is there anywhere round here that I will feel safe?” I replied, “I don’t think so, Secretary of State.” It is a glorious history that we celebrate and our museums play an important part in preserving, archiving and displaying it.

The Stirling Smith is a fantastic museum, which was founded in 1869. It was based on the philanthropy of Thomas Stewart Smith, who so far is the only artist in Scotland to have set up a museum and art gallery for the public. He made his money from the sale of the Glassingall estate and from his success as a painter. He signed his will promising the money to the Provost of Stirling to set up a museum in November 1869, but sadly he died only a few weeks later.

Philanthropists such as Smith have set up museums all across the country. However, unlike libraries, which were often set up in the same way, there is no statutory duty for councils to provide museums. Philanthropy of this nature is of huge significance and essential for the future of museums.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): In my constituency of Aberdeen South, we have the museum of the Gordon Highlanders, which is the Scottish regiment that Winston Churchill described as one of the finest in
the world. It faces the same challenges as other museums and is running a fundraising campaign. The aim is to raise £100,000 a year over the next three years, and because of the generosity of spirit of Aberdonians the museum is succeeding in that endeavour. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating all the people who have supported that initiative and also welcome the fact that the local council has also given the museum some money in its recent budget?

Stephen Kerr: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the people of Aberdeen on their generosity. Those are two things that often do not run together in a sentence, but on this occasion they absolutely do—the “generosity” of “the people of Aberdeen”.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Kerr: You’re not from Aberdeen, are you?

Rachael Maskell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I obviously represent the fine city of York, which is littered with amazing museums. However, there is a real challenge here. Local authority cuts have meant that funding for museums has also been cut, and ultimately that means that some people have to pay to access these collections. Should they not be accessible to all the public for free?

Stephen Kerr: I totally agree on the issue relating to accessibility. There are many advantages to companies and individuals making payments to support museums, but the major national museums in London, Glasgow and Edinburgh often get a bigger share of the pie than the smaller ones. In Stirling, we have superb commercial engagement with local companies, such as United Auctions, which is a major sponsor of the Stirling Smith. I urge more national companies and people of significant wealth not to ignore their local museums.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I welcome the news that my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) has got a good point there. [Laughter.]

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has got to have a good point there. [Laughter.]

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support.

Local museums are a superb way for people to interact with their own local stories; they are a way of understanding those stories. In Stirling, the museums are a way for us to understand locally how we have interacted with the national aspects of our history. Stirling is a place where many things of national importance have happened and, I hasten to add, continue to happen. I have already mentioned the battles of Bannockburn and of Stirling Bridge.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not only local artefacts that we can see in local museums, but artefacts that represent the history of our country, Great Britain? Chippenham Museum is having a refurb by the Arts Council that will allow it to have artefacts from the V&A—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be brief. If the hon. Lady wishes to make a speech, she should by all means do so.

Stephen Kerr: I welcome the news that my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) has just shared with colleagues. As the Member of Parliament for Stirling, I cannot mention the battles of Bannockburn and of Stirling Bridge too often. They happened in Stirling and are major aspects of the wars of independence. Globally significant events happened in our backyard. We feel differently about these events from people from elsewhere in Scotland because they are part of our local history. Stirling was besieged during the battle of Bannockburn in 1314, when Stirling High School was already 150 years old. I often wonder whether the students got the day off when the battle of Bannockburn was fought.

Globally, Bannockburn was an important turning point in western European history. Nationally, it solidified Scotland’s place in the world for 300 years. Locally, people had to live with it, and still have to live with it today. We are proud of it. To understand these events in their entirety, we have to understand how the global,
national and local fit together. The Stirling Smith has caltrops that would have been used to immobilise the
English cavalry in the 14th century, as well as souvenirs and guidebooks that were sold from the visitor centre in
the 19th century. The Smith is literally a stakeholder, as
it has a number of the wooden stakes that might have
been used at the battle of Bannockburn.

The effort over many years to preserve and protect
our history is breath-taking. The Smith prevented the
destruction of the Stirling heads from Stirling castle,
which were being rolled down the hill for the entertainment
of the troops stationed at the castle. Allegedly, a museum
curator dug the original plans for the Wallace monument
out of a skip. The museum team encouraged the donation
of a piece of tarpaulin that was covering someone’s
woodpile. It turned out to be the miners’ banner from
the Fallin pit during the 1984 strike. We should not
underestimate the importance of museums in preserving
our local, national and global history.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): My hon. Friend is
making a good speech on important matters, but does
he not recognise that this is not just about fixed museum
space? There are temporary museum spaces, such as
The Core in Solihull, which has many fine exhibitions
of art, local histories and many people’s stories.

Stephen Kerr: I absolutely acknowledge that fact.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon.
Gentleman agree that, like parks, museums deserve
special protection? At the moment, there is no protection
for either of those important features that everyone
values.

Stephen Kerr: Museums and parks deserve protection
and the affection of the community, which they have, as
we witnessed when the Stirling Smith Museum was
threatened. I want to mention in passing the Friends of
the Smith, because they devote hours of their time to
raise money, conduct tours and help out in many ways
to ensure that the Stirling Smith Museum operates fully.
That is evidence of the affection and devotion that local
people have for their museum.

That brings me to the Dunblane Museum. The Dunblane
Museum started life as the Dunblane Cathedral Museum
and is a fantastic museum dedicated to preserving the
history of the ancient borough of Dunblane. It has a
nationally significant collection of communion tokens—the
largest in the UK. It holds many items from the cathedral
in Dunblane. Perhaps my favourite is a bag that belonged
to an 18th-century newspaper boy or girl. This is a
museum that truly delivers—boom, boom! The fact
that the Dunblane Museum is entirely staffed by volunteers
shows the dedication and service of members of the
community, such as the honorary curator, Marjorie
Davies, and the rest of the team. These are people who
want to serve their community, and volunteers have
been protecting the museum collection since it was
established in 1943. It attracts 10,000 visitors a year.
People leave knowing more about Dunblane and its
long and distinguished history.

Volunteers struggle, though, because we put more and
more expectations on them in regulatory terms. We require
them to register with the charity regulator, we require health
and safety protection and we require data protection.
All that adds to the burden on volunteer groups and
disproportionately affects independent volunteer museums
that have to do all that while raising the money to keep
the lights on. Forms and applications are the bane of all
charitable organisations’ lives, and we have a duty to
keep those things as minimal as we can while still
protecting the public. I saw the Stirling Smith’s submission
to be recognised as a museum of national significance,
and it was a vast document akin to a PhD thesis.

The third museum in my area that I must mention is
the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Museum. Stirling
has a long and distinguished connection with the military
of this country. We claim the Argyll and Sutherland
Highlanders as our own regiment. As the old regiment
fought two world wars and countless other conflicts
around the world, I cannot imagine that filling in a few
forms would intimidate the august institution that is
dedicated to its history. Preserving the history of our
military is essential, and such museums play a huge part
in telling people the story of a regiment that is now
merged into the Royal Regiment of Scotland.

That the Argylls are a part of our history and not our
future continues to be a note of sadness for me and
many other people in my constituency, and people might think that I am
not the historian who must be preserved. The museum has a superb collection
of objects and artefacts from the hundreds of years of military conflict that the Argylls have been involved
with. It holds family medals in its vaults, making them
accessible for future generations and preventing loss.
Again, the local family stories mix with our national
story of military commitment playing its part in a
global history that goes from the Khyber pass to the
fields of France.

Local museums make a huge contribution to life in
the UK. They preserve our heritage, help us to understand
who we are and create the golden thread from the local
to the national to the global. That brings me to a number of
questions that I want to raise. I am afraid there are
some differences between England and Scotland on
these issues, and I acknowledge that from the outset,
but why should that be the case, given the level of
co-operation around the UK? Before I am interrupted
by the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith
(Deidre Brock), I hasten to add that I am not suggesting
a power grab; I am calling for better collaboration and
co-operation around the UK? Before I am interrupted
by the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith
(Deidre Brock). I hasten to add that I am not suggesting
a power grab; I am calling for better collaboration and
co-operation, as was mentioned earlier in an intervention
about the British Museum.

The national collections in London, Edinburgh and
Cardiff should be spread out and accessible. To do that,
we need a shake-up of how we indemnify the objects in
our museums. I have waxed lyrical about the museums
in my constituency, and people might think that I am
talking about a museum of national, if not global,
significance when I talk about the Smith. The real
tragedy is that it is not considered to be such. The bar
for a local museum to be considered a museum of
national importance is set worryingly high. The committee
that makes those decisions is known as the committee
of significance. Despite an application outlining all of
the wondrous national and internationally significant
elements of the museum, it is not considered to be of
national significance. Perth and Clydebank museums
are museums of national significance, while Stirling and
Kirkcaldy, despite the latter’s linoleum collection and
superb art collection, recently had their applications
knocked back. That is not right. Setting museums against

each other is not a useful or good thing to do, and I question the judgment of those charged with such decisions. The Mendoza review in England seems to address some of those issues. Why can they not also be addressed in Scotland?

The question of how museums can gain Government indemnity requires some thought. Government indemnity allows museums to access insurance for items that would be prohibitively expensive to insure. The major national collections are disjointed in how they make decisions. The Government need to consider a single indemnity scheme for the UK. It would help museums lend confidently and borrow well to enrich local communities across the country. It would allow the national collections to be available throughout these islands, bringing exciting and uplifting exhibits to the whole UK.

The treasure trove rules should also be considered. Again, in Scotland we have a different regime, although it follows the English system fairly closely. Treasure trove rules allow people who have found items to sell them to a museum with an assessed reward. The level of reward that has to be paid makes it difficult for local museums to acquire those items. A scheme to allow museums to acquire locally found items at a cheaper rate would help. An example would be the golden torcs found near Blair Drummond in my constituency. Those torcs are beautiful—they are superb examples of Celtic craftsmanship—but to see them people have to go to Edinburgh, where they are part of a large collection. That removes their local significance and what they tell us about the Celtic trading tradition in Stirlingshire, to add to a national story. When artefacts are removed from their local context they lose the local part of their story, contributing only to the national or global story.

The Dumfriesshire hoard suffered the same fate when the local museum was deemed too unsecure to show it and did not have the resources to buy it. It was one of the largest hoards of Viking materials recently to be discovered. Artefacts of huge importance to Dumfriesshire were removed from the community in which they were found. When we consider issues such as the treasure trove rules or Government indemnity, more flexibility is needed. If we lock away our treasures, whether they be national or local, we make our story smaller and lose a part of our identity.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I am interested in the hon. Gentleman’s points about repatriating items. Does he acknowledge that items sometimes need to be kept in particular conditions, and that support and extra investment are required for that?

Stephen Kerr: I understand that what I am proposing is not without challenges, but it is right to put locally discovered artefacts, which are critical to the local story of the communities we live in, in the community so that people can have the marvellous experience of understanding who they are in a long line of generations of people who have lived in that area.

Rachael Maskell: Will the hon. Gentleman congratulate the National Railway Museum, which recently gifted one of its engines to Swanage Railway so that it could be returned to its home environment and enjoyed by the wider population?

Stephen Kerr: That sounds like a jolly good idea.

Deidre Brock: To follow the hon. Gentleman’s train of thought, I wonder what his thoughts are on repatriating the Lewis chessmen from the British Museum up to the Western Isles.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Before I ask Mr Kerr to continue, could I ask that he is given a moment to respond to one intervention before another is thrown his way? Mr Kerr, you might wish to deal with any residual remarks that you had from the previous intervention.

Stephen Kerr: I am very happy with the remarks that I offered in connection with the first intervention. On the second intervention, I understand the merits, as I am trying to make clear in my speech, of making the artefacts of these islands available to all the people of these islands. They should be made accessible on the basis not of words such as “repatriation”, but of their availability to be displayed. I understand that there are challenges, but we should address those challenges. Such items tell our story, and they should be available to us so that we understand who we are, what our progenitors have done and what our future holds. All those things make up the golden thread that I am trying to describe. We need to follow the old adage of being risk-aware rather than risk-averse, lest we stop people accessing those parts of our heritage found in treasure trove or in the national collections. We will all be richer if we move in that direction.

I do not wish to dwell on museum funding, as the particular issues of museum funding in my constituency have been resolved thanks to public pressure. I am sure that many Members will want to reflect on funding, but there is one point that I would like to make. New acquisitions in museums are essential not only to enrich and enliven the position of a local museum, but as a way of recording the present, which will turn into the past. I am sure I am not alone among Members in being astonished to see things from my childhood enshrined in local museums. I recently attended an exhibition in a museum and discovered that a picture of my class of 1976 is now one of the exhibits, so I stand before hon. Members as—partially, at least—a museum exhibit.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned his childhood, which he spent in my constituency of Angus. I want to highlight the importance of museums in Angus. For example, the birthplace of J.M. Barrie, the creator of Peter Pan, is in Kirriemuir. Does my hon. Friend agree that museums are incredibly valuable to our local economy, and they drive into the local area thousands of tourists who would not come otherwise?

Stephen Kerr: It is impossible to visit Kirriemuir without visiting the birthplace of the great J.M. Barrie, just as it is impossible to visit Forfar without visiting the Meffan, which is another great museum and exhibition space.

Museum exhibits—whether they be old food packaging, shop equipment or other accoutrements of daily life—bring back memories. I would consider these examples to be from the recent past, but it turns out that flared trousers and John Denver albums are museum pieces now.
Local museums can and must be allowed to acquire items of significance from their local community as they go, collecting history as it happens. They must have the money to do that. Although philanthropy and corporate giving play a huge part in that, museums need to have state funding to keep the lights on while they collect. I am proud that in Stirling we have a common good fund, which allows the acquisition of items for the Smith collection alongside a strong corporate and philanthropic effort.

We should reflect on what happens when that goes wrong. To that end, I will touch briefly on the tragedy of the MacFarlane collection in Bridge of Allan. That museum was unloved, and then the Army was billeted in the museum, during which time the soldiers used the large collection of stuffed animals for target practice. After the war, the museum was turned into a concert hall of some significance. Many in Bridge of Allan, my home town, still talk fondly of the time that the Beatles played at the museum hall. The building lay derelict for a long time, and has now been turned into flats. They are lovely flats, but the community of Bridge of Allan is a bit poorer for the MacFarlane museum no longer being there. The community of Stirling is a bit poorer, and I would contend that we are all a bit poorer.

Stirling has an incredible political history, which is well recorded in its museums, especially the Smith. I am often reminded that Stirling has recently produced two Secretaries of State for Scotland, Tom Johnston and Michael Forsyth, as well as the Prime Minister Henry Campbell-Bannerman. The place of honour that they have in Stirling, as a city proud of its heritage, only puts more pressure on the sitting MP. A young Harold Wilson stared up at the statue of Henry Campbell-Bannerman that adorns our city centre and thought it would be a good thing to be Prime Minister.

The former Member for North West Lanarkshire, Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham, has the record of founding two political parties represented in the House of Commons—not mine, but the Scottish Labour party and the Scottish National party. He is commemorated as a local boy made good in Stirling. He is one of our own. The Stirling Smith has his riding boots, his smiddy—Graham was famous as a horse-breeder and adventurer—and, most impressively, his coffin plate, which was considered too nice to be buried with him, and was preserved for posterity. Other fascinating items hung in the Smith museum include facsimile copies of the 16th-century Stirling heads. One of them bears an uncanny, striking resemblance to another great Prime Minister: Margaret Thatcher. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] I knew that would get a response from certain Members present today.

I have spoken for long enough about the collections in my local museums and what they can tell us about our present and our future. I will conclude with a description of one item in the collection. In a corner of the Smith is a piece of mutton bone. Unremarkable as it may seem, that bone is of huge local, national and international importance. The bone was removed from the throat of the young James Drummond, who had been slowly dying as it lay lodged in his throat. James was saved, and that inspired a deep religious faith in the Drummond family, who used their fortune to build a great deal in Stirling. They built the internationally significant cemetery grounds, which follow a pattern of heaven laid out in the Bible. They built an agricultural improvement business, which improved land and made Stirling the agricultural capital it is today. They built a huge religious tract publishing house, and the needs of their workforce led to the invention of the pre-packed sandwich—so Greggs has the Drummonds to thank. The religious and temperance printing venture facilitated the construction of the large post office that is now, ironically, a public house; they were very much in favour of temperance. To top it all off, that tracheotomy in 1843 was the first recorded.

Local museums preserve our history and our culture. They allow us to look to the future, secure in the knowledge that we are building on a strong foundation. I contend that all our local museums are, in a sense, national museums. They tell the small stories; the stories of the people, great and small, who all play their part in the history of our nation. They tell the big stories of movements of people, of great men and women, and of technological change through the ages. My message today is a strong and clear one: support our local museums.

2.59 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. While thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for securing this debate, I should point out that, unlike him, I am not yet an exhibit in a museum.

As the Member of Parliament for the birthplace of Scotland’s favourite son, Robert Burns, I am acutely aware of the benefits that local museums can bring to a community. There are many museums that contribute to the cultural, social and economic life of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock. I will name but a few, such as the Rozelle museum and gallery in Alloway in Ayr. The McKechnie Institute in Girvan is very important to that community. It was bequeathed by the McKechnie brothers, who were traders who sailed or smuggled their goods to and from Girvan harbour—but they did leave the town that institute and museum. The town hall in Maybole reflects the rich industry of that town over recent years, and includes the former town bell. Perhaps Opposition Members might be tempted to make a pilgrimage to the Baird Institute in Cumnock, which delightfully plays host to a room dedicated to Keir Hardie, founder of the Labour party, first Labour politician and first leader of the Labour party. They are welcome to come along—it is well worth a visit. We are proud of it, and I give credit to East Ayrshire Council for hosting it.

I should also mention His Royal Highness Prince Charles, who secured Dumfries House for the nation. It is adjacent to Cumnock and is a wonderful asset for the Ayrshire community, for Scotland and the UK. South of Ayr, on the coast towards Girvan, Culzean Castle still has what are termed the Eisenhower rooms, where President Eisenhower was hosted after the second world war.

One of our biggest attractions must be the award-winning Robert Burns Birthplace Museum in Alloway. I pay tribute to the National Trust for Scotland, which made a hefty investment in that. It includes Burns Cottage, where the bard was born, as well as Alloway Auld Kirk. In the tale of “Tam o’ Shanter”, Tam, wearing his blue bonnet and on “his gray mare, Meg” made an approach to that church, under the guise of thunder and lightning and darkness, where he found auld Nick having a party with the witches, who in turn gave chase to Tam and
his mare. Meg was aiming for the “key-stane o’ the brig” at the Brig o’ Doon, to cross the river where the witches would not cross. The nearest the witches got was Meg’s tail and, sadly, Meg forever lost her tail. That was the tail of Meg and the tale of Tam o’ Shanter.

The monument and the gardens are there. It is a perfect destination for anyone who wants to learn more about Scotland’s national poet, who is famous throughout the world. Since the new museum was opened to the public in December 2010, it has drawn approximately 300,000 visitors per annum. They come from all over the world—America, Canada, Russia, Europe, wherever. They come to Alloway, contribute to the local economy, perhaps staying in the local area and seeing more of the wonderful sights that Ayrshire has to offer. In addition to those employed at the museum, it also supports jobs in local businesses, especially in the tourism and hospitality sector, which is very important to Scotland and the UK.

Museums, quite simply, are worth it, even on a purely economic level, but they are much more than just economic enterprises—they are there to educate, entertain and inform. Like the many other local museums in South Carrick, the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum helps everyone who walks through its doors to learn more about Ayrshire and one of its most famous sons.

If my colleague, the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), were here, I am sure he would agree that Ayrshire should also promote the good work of Sir Alexander Fleming, who discovered penicillin. The world is indebted to him for that discovery, but we do not mark that as much as we should. I am sure the hon. Gentleman would support me in taking that forward—perhaps in a pop-up museum that could be mobile and go roundabout. That is something worth pursuing. We need to promote Sir Alexander Fleming and the good work he did for not just the UK but the world.

People who come from far and wide to visit a local museum learn about the local area’s history, culture and people. They return home with a knowledge about that area that they can share with friends and family.

**Michelle Donelan:** Does my hon. Friend agree that strong relationships between Wiltshire museums and exhibition places, such as Corsham Pound and Chippenham Museum, enable our young people to learn about our history? They are our future, after all.

**Bill Grant:** I entirely agree. Our heritage and our past are the foundations of our future and young people should know the journey of their community for that future.

Visitors returning home help to put an area on the map, and that in turn attracts more people to the museum and the area in general. Museums build the cultural profile of an area and contribute to bringing in more tourists and boosting the local economy. They also help local people, as my hon. Friend said, learn more about their own heritage, encouraging community cohesion and a strong sense of civic pride, which we must retain and build on. People who know their community’s history and culture very often take pride in it and tend to care and contribute to their community. It is important that we have local museums that can pass on that local knowledge to the next generation, and it is therefore also important that local museums engage with local schools and community groups to facilitate that.

In Ayrshire we are blessed with the home of Burns and so many other cultural assets, but every part of the United Kingdom has its own story to tell, and its own local museums to tell them. Those museums are a great cultural, social and economic good, and we should not be afraid to support them.

An issue facing the majority of UK towns is the demise of our town centres as the retail landscape changes throughout the UK and Europe. We need to think seriously about taking heritage museums into town centres to add another dimension to helping to secure their future. Perhaps the dispersal of lottery funds could come in to secure the vibrancy of town centres—that was mentioned earlier.

Museums and heritage centres are often soft targets for budget cuts by councils or other public bodies. That temptation should and must be resisted as closure may prove to be folly in the long term.

I close by thanking every single person, young and old—even those as old as me—who volunteer their time and services to small local and larger museums. They are the mainstay supporting the existence of such facilities in our communities. They are so important. Our past is the foundation of our future and we should secure it as best we can.

3.7 pm

**Mike Hill** (Hartlepool) (Lab): I did not expect to speak in this debate but am happy to do so, given the enthusiasm of Members on the Government Benches for local museum services. In Hartlepool, our museum, which is now part of the National Museum of the Royal Navy in the North of England, is part of the town centre; the ship that forms part of it, HMS Trincomalee, stands proud in the middle of our town centre. There is also a Scottish connection with Robert the Bruce, who owned half of Hartlepool. Many of our wares are named after him—De Bruce ward, for example.

I originate from Rochdale, where the co-operative pioneer movement was established, and the museum there is dear to my heart as a co-operator. It was Hartlepool, however, where I have lived for 14 years and where I am very proud to be the MP, that was the first place on British shores in the first world war to be bombarded from the sea. The troops positioned at the battery were Durham Light Infantry, and the recent demise of the DLI Museum in Durham is one of the sad stories to come out of this debate. I am hopeful that the museum will be resurrected as part of development plans within the county. Like my constituents, I am very proud of our regiment’s historic past, and I hope the position on that will be something of a phoenix.

On the situation with outreach, it is very important that museums reach out to communities, and I get that. The other point I would make is about the Cleveland archaeological unit, which is based in Hartlepool and feeds a lot of things into our local museums. It, too, is underfunded and I would like reassurances from the Minister that such associated services are looked at as well when it comes to future funding.

3.9 pm

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I will not take issue with my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling...
(Stephen Kerr) about which of us is older and should feature in a museum. I am quite happy to bear his good counsel on this.

In 2014, I produced a report entitled “The Future of Local Government Archaeology Services” along with my colleague from the other place, Lord Redesdale. We are both fellows of the Society of Antiquaries, which stood behind the report, and it was commissioned by the then Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey). It was a comprehensive report that looked at the future of museums, archaeology services and funding. It gathered written and oral evidence from more than 80 contributors—a reputable number—who provided insight, data and suggestions for solutions. I will not go through all of the recommendations that we came up with, although I will feature a couple of them as they relate to what other hon. Members have said. One recommendation that I will mention relates to local museums.

Many of the recommendations reflect the way in which archaeology services are organised on the ground and how people should approach them. The recommendation that relates to museums asks for an urgent rationalisation of the system for retention of material. Many museums received bag after bag of Roman brick from archaeological excavations. There is nothing that you can do with a bag of Roman brick except weigh it, and then you might as well throw it away. There is absolutely no point in keeping that brick—and I say that as an archaeologist myself. The focus on trying to retain all that takes away the focus that the museum should have on the things that it actually wants to keep and show. So we came up with a good recommendation on that.

Overall we found convincing evidence to suggest that a sharing of services on a multi-authority or sub-regional basis can lead to a much greater resilience of services. Such services would be capable of achieving economies of scale, which individual local museums cannot, as well as other benefits in terms of quality of services, greater provision of skills and expertise, and more opportunities to ensure that expertise is passed on and not lost. Local expertise is a particular skill that we ought to value.

For example, the Greater Manchester Archaeological Advisory Service builds on the thriving community of local volunteers that it has developed. It provides a forum for them, it facilitates grants for community projects, and it enhances the archaeological and historical work that is undertaken. It also provides skills training for local volunteers and the potential for implementing community reporting mechanisms across the board. Those are incredibly important aspects of the work.

I will turn briefly to retention in archives and the finds that have been produced. Although it would be wrong to say that museums are not selective, at the moment museums have no imperative at all to be selective, which is a great shame. Also, the rules governing the retention of archaeological material were set by the Arts Council, not by central or local government. That situation has produced one thing above all in how museums look at their collections: a responsibility too burdensome for the museums to carry on with.

Sustainability issues affecting the deposition of material in archives is an endemic problem. To become much more sustainable, it is recommended that archives should adopt much stricter policies on accessions, with clear identification of the material of highest value and what they are going to do with it. That does not gainsay at all the comments made by my colleagues, but we need to put those services on a stable basis and they need to adhere to standards that have sustainable accession policies. We also recommended that English Heritage engage further with the Arts Council and the museum sector to pursue further strategies to provide that.

I sincerely hope that we do not lose our local museums. They play an important part. We should look at their combining certain of their services in order to do things better and not have to do things in an ad hoc way. Above all, we should put them on a sustainable basis for the future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Wind-ups will begin at half past three.

3.16 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I will not take that much time, Mrs Main. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship and a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell).

One of the benefits of turning up to a debate without a prepared speech is that a Member can make it up as they go along, take the sense of the debate and then create a view. I have noticed during this debate that we have not once used the word “Brexit”. As an ardent Brexiteer, I am disappointed. As I listened to the fantastic contributions, I realised that we have not had the “so what?” question. We have lots of museums. They are brilliant and have lots of lovely artefacts for people to come and see, but the “so what?” question is critical.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) suggested that the purpose of museums is to educate and entertain. I do not detract from that at all, but I think their purpose is to inspire. Regardless of whether people voted for remain or leave, they know that this country has an incredible history that should be celebrated. I am an ardent Brexiteer because I have absolute faith in our nation to go forward into the world globally and to dominate. Our history tells us we have done that previously and we can do it again.

The question before us today is that this House has considered museums. I do not think it is possible for us to answer yes to that question unless we have considered the museums of the Black country, particularly a museum in my constituency. If we start small and grow, in my constituency we have the Willenhall Lock Museum, a Victorian building that was constructed in about 1840. There is a house at the front of the premises, and on a good day it is populated by volunteers dressed in traditional clothing and bringing the building to life. They cook traditional food using products that were available at the time. The house is gaslit, so people get a real feel of what life was like, and the volunteers are brilliant at bringing the exhibits to life and giving people a real opportunity to interact.

Stephanie Peacock: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should pay a huge tribute to the volunteers who keep local museums running, such as the Maurice Dobson Museum and Heritage Centre down the road from...
where I live, in Darfield near Barnsley? It is a fantastic local resource, and it is thanks to volunteers that it keeps going.

Eddie Hughes: I completely endorse those comments. To a degree, without those volunteers, some of the buildings in question would not be maintained. It is not always a question of money, although of course we need more money. The efforts of such people sustain the buildings and keep educating and inspiring us.

Moving through the museum, the house at the front gives a sense of what life was like, and in the buildings at the back visitors can see where locks were made locally. They were bespoke, clumsy, large products, but the museum gives a sense of why Willenhall was great and why at one time it made most of the locks used in the country. That has led to Guardian Locks in my constituency, a business that has existed since 1982. It is a family-run enterprise and does not do mass manufacture, which means it can offer clients a bespoke service. Sometimes it delivers only one or two locks, but people know it gives excellent service. The product is guaranteed and the family stand completely behind the products they provide.

Assa Abloy is also in my constituency. It was formed in 1994 and, if we believe its website, might be the largest provider globally of intelligent lock systems.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I ask the hon. Gentleman to refer to museums on a regular basis. His comments will then be in order. He is straying somewhat off the topic.

Eddie Hughes: I am sorry, Mrs Main. I was coming back to my point of inspiration. It is Willenhall Lock Museum that has inspired Guardian Locks and Assa Abloy to produce high-quality locks on a global scale.

Obviously, it is not only locks that we deal with in the Black country. Walsall, our local football club, is nicknamed the Saddlers because we have a 200-year history of leather crafting in Walsall. At the Leather Museum, visitors can enjoy a tour, see how the products were crafted and, according to the website, make a keyring. People are leather crafters by the time they leave, having enjoyed their visit.

However, the scale of things gets bigger, because of the Black Country Living Museum, which is spread over 26 acres—hard to imagine. That huge site has 50 buildings taken from other parts of the Black country and reconstructed to form a high street as well as various businesses. It is populated partly by volunteers, who show people traditional smithing and crafts that we might have forgotten. The point of those museums is that they inspire. Those who go to the museum have an opportunity to see, in many ways, the reason this country is so great, and the opportunity that we have taken to innovate and lead the world. People young and old get that chance to see why our future has been fantastic in the past, and will be yet again.

It is important, with reference to the Mendoza review, that museums take the opportunity to understand how they should operate in an era of restricted funds. They need to ensure that they bring crowds through the door. Sometimes money has to change hands. At Willenhall Lock Museum, a group of 10 people can have a tour for £75, and for larger groups it is an extra £5 a person. Check the website—or in fact, Mrs Main, do not check the website: if you visit I shall give you a tour myself. To make their future sustainable, museums need new ways to bring people in and new access to funds, and they need to engage with the public. We have a great future, and our history is represented in the museums I have described. I suggest everyone should come to the Black country.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that kind invitation. My husband is from Birmingham way, and I have been to the Black Country Living Museum, but if I am ever up that way again I will perhaps look him up.

3.24 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Main. It was interesting to hear the comments of the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). He spoke at length about local museums in his constituency, of course, and I particularly liked the mention of the many volunteers who along with staff, play such a huge part in keeping local museums going. Members on both sides of the House have made many mentions of the local museums in their constituencies. There are almost too many to mention now, but that surely indicates how important a place those museums hold in our hearts.

While I note the enthusiasm of the hon. Member for Stirling, I am still reminded of a Mrs Cameron who won an award last year for her campaigning against the cuts to local services that Tory austerity brings. She lives in Oxfordshire somewhere and I believe that her son used to be in politics. That was of course a Tory council implementing the cuts of a Tory Government, driven by the austerity ideology, which would completely drive away such services if it could. I frankly find it a harmful, damaging and cynical ideology, born of a lack of concern for society and supported by a deceitful claim that the Government have no money for fripperies such as museums. A few billion to compensate for the failure of UK policy on the EU can be found down the back of the sofa and billions for nuclear weapons are in the biscuit tin above the fridge, but a few thousand to run local services such as museums appears to the Government to be an outrageous consideration at times.

Stephen Kerr: I find it a bit rich for the Scottish National party spokesperson to take that tone in the debate. An SNP council was threatening to close the Smith Museum in Stirling. It is a bit rich for me to sit and listen to a sermon.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Interventions usually pose a question, Mr Kerr, but I am sure the hon. Lady will note and perhaps respond to your remarks.

Deidre Brock: I am glad to take the opportunity to mention—and I am sure the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge—the work of Museums Galleries Scotland in providing funding for local museums in Scotland. It will be pleasing to see that it is distributing nearly £750,000 in capital grants to small museums in this round of funding, which is one of four in the year, and will, I am sure, want to congratulate our Cabinet Secretary for Finance on finding an extra £200,000 for this round
of funding. He will also be delighted by the range of funds available to museums from Museums Galleries Scotland—particularly, perhaps, the funding for collections in the programme to deliver against the national strategy.

Alistair Darling, in the dog days of the last Labour Government, said he planned spending cuts deeper and more savage than anything Thatcher had done. The response of George Osborne and the current incumbent of No. 11 Downing Street seems to be, “Hold my beer,” with little regard for the cultural carnage that could follow.

The hon. Member for Stirling bemoaned becoming a museum artefact, but he might think upon that and consider it better than the alternative. I grew up in Australia, where the ownership of history is a contentious issue, and the different attitudes often create conflict. I suggest that there is a bit of that in Scotland as well. Those who would remember the whole of Scotland, including its working people, its poor and its dispossessed, do not necessarily sit comfortably with those who would laud royalty and wealth. Similarly, there is little in the way of commemoration of the Gaelic heritage of Scotland.

I asked earlier whether the hon. Gentleman would support the repatriation of the Lewis chessmen. I wonder whether he believes that collections held centrally should be sent back where they came from, and whether he supports the repatriation of items such as the Elgin marbles—not to Elgin, before some wag starts up—but back to Greece.

Bill Grant: Again, I am old enough to be an exhibit, but does not the hon. Lady agree that the greatest risk to museums and heritage centres in Scotland is the continued and repeated unnecessary cuts to council budgets by the Scottish Government when there is no need to do so, and when they can find £115 million at the drop of a hat to support their equivalent of the DUP, the Green party?

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Interesting though it is to cover the minutiae of politics between the SNP and other parties, I hope we will stick with the subject of the debate, which is museums.

Deidre Brock: Indeed. Thank you, Mrs Main. I will take your advice. It would be difficult to do so now, but we shall certainly continue that conversation outside this debate, I have no doubt.

To return to the Elgin marbles, should all those things be sent back where they came from, so that they have cultural and local resonance, as the hon. Member for Stirling suggested about some items in the Scottish national collections? Does he support the repatriation of the “Book of Deer”, for example?

Museums are, in the main, staffed by enthusiastic people who try to ensure that a record of the past is preserved and presented to future generations intact for reinterpretation. I contend, that they reckon without political barbarians, and they have not seen the huge amount of brutality coming their way. Under the SNP, local authorities are getting a larger share of the Scottish budget than ever. Tory cuts mean that the overall budget for Scotland is reducing, but the share going to local government is increasing, and across Scotland that investment is paying off.

In Edinburgh, museum opening hours will be extended this year so that more people can visit and more citizens engage, and more revenue will be generated. The Museum of Edinburgh, the Museum of Childhood, the People’s Story Museum, the Writers Museum—all will have extended hours. I also want to mention the fantastic staff who steer those museums and galleries. They manage to work miracles on a small budget, and as convenor for culture and leisure in Edinburgh for five years, one of my greatest pleasures was to have got to know them and to have seen at first hand their ingenuity, dedication, expert knowledge and loving care for the items and buildings in the city’s ownership.

One of my favourite museums—I hope this is allowed a mention—is the Museum of Edinburgh, which is not to be confused with the National Museum of Scotland on Chambers Street, although it often is. The Museum of Edinburgh possesses objects that range from a cabinet made by Deacon Brodie that once rested in the bedroom of the young Robert Louis Stevenson, to signs that swung above shops in Leith in my constituency in the 18th and 19th centuries, and beautiful examples of glass, silver and pottery for which Edinburgh and its surrounds were once renowned. I suggest that Members come to visit Edinburgh’s museums—I might be biased, but I think that Scotland’s capital city performs extremely well in maintaining a range of local museums that tell different aspects of its story.

The story elsewhere is not as rosy as some hon. Members have suggested. A survey of cuts in 2015 found that nearly one in five English regional museums closed one part or branch to the public in that year, and 10% of England’s museums are to introduce entry charges. At the end of last year, the Mendoza review of England’s museums reported a 13% reduction in funding over the past 10 years—an indication, I suggest, that some of England’s politicians are not listening to England’s people.

Finally, the logical consequence of what some would describe as barbarous Tory policies since 2010 is clear: they create a desert and they call it culture. If any Member of the governing party really cared about local museums, they would be lobbying their Chancellor for an immediate end to austerity.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) on securing today’s debate. His tremendous enthusiasm for local museums shone through, particularly in his references to an antique nipple protector and an internationally renowned mutton bone. Only he could have brought those items to life in such a way during the debate. He also told us something I did not know, even though I used to teach history: that Mary Queen of Scots played football. I knew she had played golf, but not football—indeed, it is a shame that she is not available for the current Scottish national team, given their recent fortunes.

The hon. Gentleman made an interesting proposal on indemnity, and he referred back to Scottish history at some length. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) mentioned the lack of references to Scotland’s Gaelic heritage, and a much forgotten aspect of Scottish history that is not mentioned sufficiently is its Welsh heritage. The greatest poem in the Welsh
language, the ancient poem “Y Gododdin” describes a battle between Welsh-speaking warriors from the south of Scotland at Catterick in North Yorkshire with the Anglo-Saxons. Indeed, the hon. Lady’s constituency’s name of Edinburgh derives etymologically from the old Welsh—I thought I would add that into the mix since we are having lengthy discussions on Scottish history. The hon. Member for Stirling also recognised that state funding is important, and I will come back to that point.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) who spoke about the Keir Hardie exhibition, and I will certainly visit that if I get the chance to go to his part of the world in future. He also described the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, which again sounds like a wonderful place to visit. As he rightly said, museums “are worth it”, and I will come back to that later in my remarks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) spoke about the importance of funding local museums, and he described some museums in his constituency. He spoke not just of museums themselves, but also of the associated services, which is an important point. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), our resident archaeologist, spoke about the review he undertook. He said that it is important that we do not lose our local museums, and I could not agree more. He also described some of the ways that he thought those museums could be made more sustainable.

It was all spoiled, however, by the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) who introduced the “B-word” into the debate—we were all getting along so well until that point. He described how he thought that we as a country should “go forward into the world and dominate”—I think those were the words he used—as we have done in the past, although I am not quite sure what he has in mind. He also said that “our future has been fantastic in the past”, which I thought was the quote of the day. He described a wonderful sounding Black Country Living Museum in his constituency, which again sounds like a marvellous place to visit.

As hon. Members have made clear, local museums are a crucial part of the UK’s cultural life. They tell the story of specific communities up and down the country and help to preserve a continuous sense of community identity. People often feel an ownership of their local museum that they do not always feel about larger civic institutions. As a result, the audience of local museums can often be more diverse and representative than for other larger museums.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the St Fagans National Museum of History in my constituency of Cardiff West. Rather like the Black Country Living Museum, it is on a large site with buildings from all over Wales. It is a wonderful place to visit, and was recently the happy recipient of funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund. That is helping it to develop facilities, including a new “gweithdy”, as we say in Welsh—a place where people can go and try some of the wonderful new facilities. If Members ever visit Cardiff, I suggest that they go to the edge of town and visit that museum.

For the reasons we have heard, local museums sometimes have to charge for entry. Constituency MPs are clearly aware of the benefits that local museums bring, but those museums are facing funding problems and threats of closure. There are ways we can try to overcome that fact, but we cannot divorce it from the UK Government’s cuts to the budgets of the devolved nations through the Barnett formula, and to local authorities. The Local Government Association states that there have been staggering cuts since 2010, and that central Government funding will be reduced by a further 54% by 2020. In that context, it is no surprise that local authorities struggle to maintain their services, particularly non-statutory services such as museums.

The Mendoza report, commissioned by the Department, identified museums that are run and supported by their local authority as those most vulnerable to funding pressures. Last week, on the same day the Government published museum visitor numbers, the Museum Taskforce published its report, which considered the funding of museums in England. It stated:

“Often it is less prosperous areas that are feeling the brunt of the crisis in funding and there is concern that further reductions in public finances will leave local authorities in less wealthy areas, in particular, unable to fund non-statutory services such as museums.”

Councils are the biggest public sector investors in culture, including museums and galleries, and despite reductions in council funding from central Government, they valiantly continue to spend more than £1 billion per year on culture. That is a good investment because culture is a very good source of economic regeneration. I encourage local authorities of all stripes to continue to do that.

We need more than fine words about local museums from the Government; we need to put an end to the continuous cuts that are putting them at risk. It seems contradictory to protest the underfunding of local museums while propping up a Government who seem intent on cutting the funding available to local authorities. The hon. Member for Stirling was very fair in his remarks, and I hope Conservative Members put pressure on Ministers to ensure local authority funding is not cut so savagely that they are forced to cut local museums. The Government seem determined to ignore that at the moment, but I hope there will be a change of mind under the new Minister.

The Opposition Front-Bench team thought we would look into the issue ourselves when we were recently trying to get to the bottom of what is happening to our local museums, and we conducted a bit of research into the opening hours of local authority museums in England through hundreds of freedom of information requests. We gathered information from a sample of 250 local museums, which showed a huge decline in museum opening hours in the past seven years. Since 2010, more than 40% of local authority museums have decreased their opening hours by an average of 30%. Just across our sample, that is a loss of almost 23,500 opening hours since 2010.

Those results confirm that museums are bearing the brunt of the Government’s local authority cuts. At the end of the day, it should not be up to the Opposition, who have fewer resources, to collect such statistics via freedom of information requests. The Government should be doing that work themselves so they better understand the sectors they represent.

Our museums have to contend not only with the reduction in local authority funding, but with the reduced funding from the lottery and the potential loss of EU funding—the “B” word is not going to issue from my lips. Late last year, the Heritage Lottery Fund announced
that it will distribute only £190 million in the coming financial year, down from £406 million in 2016-17. In addition, no new major grants will be awarded during this transitional year. The Government published their heritage statement only a few days after that announcement, and the document did not even mention the possible implications of that reduction in funds for museums and the wider heritage sector.

The Arts Council’s recent report on the EU funding that arts and cultural organisations in the UK receive shows that museums have received more than £13 million from regional funds alone. Despite that, in response to a written question, the Government failed to outline whether that funding will be preserved when we leave the European Union.

Like the hon. Member for Stirling, I have political differences with the Scottish Government in Holyrood, although probably for different reasons, but it is undeniable that the UK central Government’s austerity policies and the effect they have on the devolved nations and councils around the country are at the root of local museums’ problems. Budget decisions made in this House have a direct effect on funding and resourcing in devolved policy areas and local authorities. On all three of these issues—local council cuts, lottery funding reductions and EU funding reductions post-Brexit—the Government need to take responsibility and the actions necessary to ensure our proud cultural heritage continues to be available to the widest possible audience.

I do not want to be overwhelmingly negative, because this has been a jovial debate and a lot of exciting and inspiring work is taking place in our museums. As part of my Front-Bench brief, I have had the pleasure of visiting some fabulous museums around the country. I have been to country homes and seaside fishing museums, and later this month I will be travelling up to the north of England to see some exciting work taking place in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), where there is a wonderful award-winning local museum.

We can all be proud of our cultural heritage in the UK. We should all be able to share it and feel that we have ownership of it. However, the Government must not bury their head in the sand. If they continue to do so, I will continue to draw attention to the challenges our museums face and to advocate on their behalf.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Thank you for your chairmanship, Mrs Main. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan). I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for introducing this debate on a subject that is very important to us all. I commend all hon. Members for their valuable contributions. Even greater congratulations are due to local councils and their constituents, to save the museum in Stirling.

I was delighted to be appointed Minister for the arts, heritage and tourism earlier this year. It is a great privilege to be the Minister responsible for part of this country’s world-leading museums sector. Local authorities will note that cutting culture, museums and galleries is a false economy. The United Kingdom’s museums are hugely popular: more than half of the nation’s adult population visited a museum in 2016, and three of England’s national museums were in the top 10 most visited attractions in the whole world in 2016.

I congratulate hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber for their enthusiasm and affection for their local museums, including the D.H. Lawrence Birthplace Museum in Ashfield, the wonderful Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Regimental Museum in Stirling and many others. In the past few weeks, I have visited the National Railway Museum in York and seen the wonderful work that the Science Museum Group is doing there. My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) mentioned Dumfries House, which is a wonderful example of work that has been done in the national interest and has helped the local community. We are lucky that His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales has done an enormous amount of work.

Local authorities still spend more than £200 million annually on culture and museums. Her Majesty’s Government have maintained cash levels of funding for the museums sector, and we are introducing new sources of funding, such as tax relief for exhibitions. The local government funding settlement is worth more than £200 billion between 2015 and 2020. Locally elected councils decide how to spend money in their area. I reiterate the message that it is a false economy to cut culture. Local authorities have that responsibility.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) mentioned royalty. I believe that Her Majesty’s yacht Britannia is based in the hon. Lady’s constituency. It brings in hundreds of thousands of visitors to her constituency, so she should be very grateful for that royal connection for that and many other reasons.

I am proud that free entry to museums remains Government policy. There is a wide variety and a huge number of museums in the United Kingdom. There are more than 2,000 museums in England alone. The Government provide more than £800 million through grants from the Arts Council, the Heritage Lottery Fund and others, which helps museums to protect their collections and keeps them accessible to as many people as possible. The VAT 33A scheme allows eligible museums to claim back VAT that is incurred when putting on free exhibitions, so that is something to bear in mind.

The Heritage Lottery Fund continues to be a major funder of museums under Sir Peter Luff. My Department will work very closely with it to implement the recommendations in the Mendoza review, which several hon. Members mentioned. In 2018, HLF will invest substantial sums—in the region of £190 million—in arts and heritage in the UK. It will also consult on its future priorities, and it will announce new funding in the autumn of this year. That is something to watch out for.

Museums are a vital part of Britain’s tourism offer: 40% of visitors to all parts of the UK cite culture as the reason for their visit. Furthermore, the high profile of our museums helps to build international relations. As we all know, culture is a bridge between nations and peoples, and it helps to promote Britain to the world. It helps to put us top in soft power.

The British Museum, as has been alluded to, is already sending around the country items that are linked to different parts of the country. That helps local museums, as we heard, and at a local level museums can play a
vital role in their communities, telling the story of a place and its people and helping to shape it. They develop and showcase great British talent, from architecture and design to portraiture and ceramics, and world-class curatorial skills.

Museums are vital to our economy. Research by the Arts Council suggests that museums in England alone generate £2.64 billion in income and £1.45 billion in economic output each year—so they make money for the country—and that funding for the arts brings in up to £4 for every £1 invested. Museums are very good value for money.

As for Scotland, cultural policy is, of course, a devolved matter. I may therefore be unable to comment on questions that relate to the specifics of devolved policy, but I assure all Members that I am a keen admirer of Scotland’s rich cultural heritage, which is astounding in its breadth and depth. It is important to note that there are also some excellent cross-border partnerships between museums. That happens between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as well as between Scotland and England, and elsewhere. For example, the recent critically acclaimed exhibition of works by British realist painters at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art brought together more than 80 paintings by some 50 artists, loaned from museums throughout the nation.

I am also really excited about V&A Dundee—recently, by the way, I met the leader of Dundee City Council, who was very impressive—which is due to open in September this year, in a stunning new building on Dundee’s waterfront that will provide a venue to share the V&A’s collection and exhibitions more widely across the UK; it has an extraordinary collection. The museum will also showcase Scotland’s exceptional and creative heritage as its first museum dedicated to design.

Hon. Members have alluded to the Mendoza review of museums in England, which was published a few months ago in November. The review looked at how museums operate today, what the public want from them, and how Government can best support them. It makes a number of recommendations to Government and government agencies, asking us to work closely together to help our museums flourish. I commend Neil Mendoza’s review, which is very good.

The review’s focus is restricted to the museums sector in England, but many of the themes that emerge from the report are relevant to institutions across the entire country. In the course of the review, Neil Mendoza and his team visited museums the length and breadth of the country. I am pleased to say that he found a thriving sector, supported by more than £800 million of public funding from a variety of sources each year.

There have been challenges for the sector in recent years. It is true that some smaller museums have had to change the way in which they work in order to adapt to reductions in local authority funding. Many museums, however, have successfully adapted to that new climate. I should point out that the review team found numerous examples of museums taking a more commercial approach and thinking imaginatively about how to care for their collections in such a way as to continue to allow as many people as possible to experience them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling raised further questions about the Scottish treasure trove rules with my Department and the provisions relating to collections of national significance and the museums in his constituency. He will appreciate that I am not responsible for matters that fall within devolved competence, but I...
am sure that officials from the Scottish Government and the Scotland Office will be happy to discuss those points with him in further detail.

I am delighted to have had the opportunity to champion museums in my first debate as arts Minister in this Chamber. The breadth and depth of the contributions to this afternoon’s sitting demonstrates just how valuable, treasured and beloved our museums are. I look forward to working with everyone in this important role.

3.58 pm

Stephen Kerr: May I say how much I appreciate the response from the Minister? He is quite right; as I pointed out in my remarks, things are different between Scotland and England. I also appreciate the comments of the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), and those of other Members who have contributed to the debate.

In summary, the word I take away from the contributions that I have heard this afternoon is “inspiration”—that word was offered to us by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), with whom I share an office—because by enjoying and appreciating our past, we gain confidence for the challenges ahead of us now and for the future.

Someone once said that the best way to celebrate great history is to make more great history. We have to know and appreciate the great history we have in order to be in a position to look forward to making greater history. In that respect, I concur with the importance of museums as a representation of history living in our communities.

I will offer one last plea to my colleagues, and that is to use our museum spaces. Recently I hosted an event attended by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in the Smith Museum, which was an excellent and wholly appropriate place to have such a gathering. I invite my colleagues to make use of their museums in future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered local museums.
depressed and is a suicide risk. Imagine how difficult it must have been for him to even discuss such a matter with his mother, which he does no longer. His situation also has huge implications on his having children. Who present here today would not feel for him, or indeed his mother, who is probably denied the huge pleasure that grandchildren bring to any family?

It seems reasonable to assume that the perceived shame and dread about prospects brought about by sexual dysfunctions must be a factor in reported isotretinoin-inspired suicides. That certainly seems to be true in the case of 24-year-old Jesse Jones from Dorset, whose sad loss was mentioned in the 2013 debate. In a final email to his parents before he committed suicide, he wrote:

“Anything to do with the opposite sex isn’t psychologically appealing. I used to have to try and stop myself from thinking about girls all of the time; now, I could hardly care less.”

Loss of libido was one of the many symptoms that Jesse and his parents blamed directly on the drug isotretinoin.

I have not mentioned the effects of isotretinoin on young women. I gather, though, also from anecdotal stories, that it has a similar effect to that of men—a loss of libido. Certainly, it is hugely dangerous if a woman becomes less social. It has long been known that isotretinoin is likely to cause birth defects in babies in rather the same way as in victims of thalidomide. I gather, therefore, that medical professionals are very careful about prescribing isotretinoin to young women and that they check carefully that they not pregnant or will not become pregnant. But pregnancy can sometimes come as a bit of a surprise—then what?

In researching for this debate, I have read many sad stories about those who used isotretinoin. The effects on people’s mood and outlook can be very quick—sometimes within a few weeks. Patients can go from being carefree, outgoing and happy individuals to being utterly depressed, isolated and desperate in a very short time. I read of one case of that time being three weeks from the first use of isotretinoin to suicide. Surely, there is something amiss for some—perhaps not all—who take isotretinoin. Isotretinoin may be a curse disguised as a blessing to a minority of people who suffer severely from acne.

I immediately warned her to tell them about the potential problems I am talking about.

The percentage of people who develop obvious side effects from taking isotretinoin may be small, but it is clear that there may well be huge danger for some of them. As it is prescribed under circumstances where severe acne has failed to respond to other treatments, I presume that the balance of professional opinion continues to accept that it can have a place on the shelves of dispensing chemists—but I wonder whether it should, given the amount of anecdotal evidence about its harmful side effects.

I gather that the Department of Health has agreed that, when a patient is prescribed isotretinoin, the accompanying patient information leaflet—the so-called PIL—should specifically warn about the possibility of erectile dysfunction and diminished libido. Those additional cautions appeared on the Government’s website in October 2017, yet, as I understand it, at least some PILs handed out by medical practitioners have not yet been updated. I hear that, of last Friday, the pharmacist at one of my local hospitals apparently remained innocently unaware of those changes, too. Perhaps many other pharmacists and even dermatologists are in the dark about those new warnings.

I checked whether I could get hold of isotretinoin pills with relative ease and without a prescription. Of course, I used the internet. I discovered that British companies such as Lloyds Pharmacy insist on a prescription, but that is not so for companies based overseas. The very first company that appeared on my screen—even before any British ones—was called Online Pharmacy, which is based in the United States. Somewhat ironically given the reason I was looking at the website, its strapline was “Safe and High Quality Medicines”. The Online Pharmacy website informed me that I could purchase 10 isotretinoin pills for £45.07. For a further £18.10, I could get them delivered to my home in a “discreet package” by express mail direct from the United States. Incidentally, Online Pharmacy also promised to include two free Viagra tablets, which is even more darkly ironic considering the problems I am talking about.

Last weekend, I asked Delphine, our 21-year-old daughter, whether she had ever heard of isotretinoin for solving problems with acne. With her, I called it Roaccutane, which is the name used in the UK. She replied that she had and that some of her friends had used it. Of course, I immediately warned her to tell them about the potential dangers. If a young person suffering badly from acne hears of a “miracle” pill that they can get over the internet, might they not just do so, ignoring or perhaps just in ignorance of the risks? After all, my daughter knew nothing of the associated dangers.

After three debates in Parliament in which Members have expressed concern about this drug’s impact on patients, surely it is time for a well-funded and sizeable Department of Health study into the possible problems of using isotretinoin so that we know the answer. In the meantime, it might not go amiss to ensure that mandatory warnings are given to and by medical practitioners who prescribe isotretinoin.
isotretinoin on those who have an adverse reaction to it. He gave me a lot to think about, and I will reflect on the points he made.

It is worth reminding the House of the statement that the Secretary of State made only a couple of weeks ago about the review of medical products and devices, which comes on the back of similar concerns having been raised about other drugs and whether patients are properly advised of the potential side effects of those treatments. He announced that that review would look at three particular products, but also at whether we need to learn wider lessons.

My hon. Friend gave a good example of why we perhaps need to reflect on whether we think sufficiently about how we advise patients to best look after themselves. Our licensing and regulation process for medicines is very scientific and very much based on the product, but, as he explained, the impact of adverse reactions is on human beings. We need to ensure that we deal with these things in the most humane way, because there are real human impacts, which he powerfully outlined.

I welcome this opportunity to amplify the points that my hon. Friend made by providing an update on the risks associated with the use of isotretinoin and on what else we can do to advise patients of its potential side effects. Isotretinoin is licensed on the basis that it is seen as a highly effective medicine for the treatment of severe and resistant acne. Acne affects around 80% of adolescents at one time or another and can affect adults, too. Acne can have a significant negative impact on the lives of sufferers, and it can be very debilitating and distressing. Many forms of acne respond well to treatment with creams, ointments or antibiotics; isotretinoin is reserved for the most acute and resistant cases.

We estimate that 30,000 patients use isotretinoin each year in the UK. Worldwide, more than 18 million people have used the drug. For most people, a single course of treatment leads to the end of their acne, but, as with all medicines, there is the risk of side effects in some people. It is impossible to predict which individuals will suffer a side effect from a medicine. The most important thing we can do is to ensure that, when patients are prescribed a drug, they are fully aware of the risks associated with it so that they can make an informed choice. As my hon. Friend suggested, we are often talking about teenagers, whose stage of development means they are not best placed to make such an informed choice, so we also need to ensure that doctors and prescribers can have sensible and mature conversations with their patients and that we make all the information readily available.

It is worth saying that the risks and benefits of isotretinoin were carefully considered at the time of licensing. Because of the serious side effects associated with the drug, as outlined by my hon. Friend, it is licensed only for use in the most severe forms of acne that do not respond to other treatments. However, as he said, people can find it easy to track down drugs via the internet. Therefore, while we can put in place procedures to ensure that prescribers give the right advice, the opportunities to track down drugs via the internet remain, where such protections are not available. We therefore need to think about what to do through education. While our licensing system is a scientific process that is respected around the world, we need to consider properly whether we are doing enough to inform patients about how they should consider risk.

In Britain, isotretinoin can be given only under supervision of a consultant dermatologist, and it is generally dispensed via hospitals—however, my hon. Friend found it easy to identify a supplier. We need to ensure that prescribing decisions are made by healthcare professionals who have the most experience. We need to consider whether we think sufficiently about the review of medicines safety is an ongoing process, which recognises that clinical trials will not always pick up every single side effect. The most common known side effect of taking this drug is dryness of the skin. That does not include Mr Google.

My hon. Friend talked about the information leaflet for patients, which is included in all licensed medicines packs. That is an essential tool, but we need to ensure that people do read it. He mentioned that some supplies do not contain the most up-to-date guidance. That is because supplies are being worked through—all new stocks contain the up-to-date leaflet. We will, however, ensure that the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency continues to communicate that best advice to address some of those issues.

We really need to think more carefully about how we can ensure that patients are owning their treatment and properly assess whether they are considering the risks associated with using a particular medicine. I want to start a debate about the principle of informed consent. I am sure that, in the cases my hon. Friend outlined, had the risks of potential depression been properly communicated there might have been a very different outcome. They may have chosen to use the products anyway, but what is important is that patients make an informed choice, in full knowledge of potential side effects.

The MHRA continues to review side effects. The review of medicines safety is an ongoing process, which work is undertaken properly.

The national confidential inquiry into suicide and homicide by people with mental illness highlighted that health conditions were a theme, and within that acne was an evident theme in suicide. When someone—often people with conditions such as acne—has been diagnosed with depression, we expect the NHS to follow guidelines on the management of that depression, which include reviewing how they are interacting with any medicine they are prescribed. Again, we must ensure that that work is undertaken properly.

Isotretinoin is a highly effective medicine that has changed many lives for the better. However, as with any effective medicine, the benefit must be balanced against the risks, and decisions about prescribing and taking medicines need to be supported by clear and comprehensible information. Few here will not have known someone...
who has suffered physically or mentally with the scars of acne, but few, too, would doubt the serious nature of the potential side effects of this powerful medicine.

I should refer to the point my hon. Friend made about a possible association with male sexual dysfunction. Many reports have come to light through the UK yellow card scheme and similar reporting schemes worldwide. In the latest review, conducted just last year, there was sufficient cumulative data to add warnings to patient information about the possibility of experiencing lower libido, or problems getting or maintaining an erection.

The MHRA communicated information about those possible side effects to healthcare professionals in the UK in its drug safety update bulletin in October last year. It is therefore making efforts to raise awareness of the issue and support discussions with patients regarding their treatment. The issue is being closely monitored in order to gain more information about possible side effects and to try to establish whether there are any trends or particular at-risk patients. Although some patients recover after treatment is stopped, for others, as my hon. Friend outlined, the side effects have continued after treatment was completed. It is not clear from the available evidence how the medicine may be causing the problem, but the MHRA will continue to gather intelligence.

My hon. Friend also referred to the risk to unborn babies in the event that women get pregnant. Women taking this drug generally need to have a pregnancy test every month and use effective contraception throughout their course of treatment. That illustrates the awareness of risk management in that context, but we need to consider whether we need to do more to ensure that male users are properly informed of the risks.

I repeat that I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this issue to my attention. I am concerned about the whole issue of informed consent of patients. The conversations that happen when drugs are prescribed are based on an asymmetry of knowledge and information. Perhaps in deference to medical expertise, we do not always ask the right questions when we are offered a treatment. Perhaps in deference to professionals’ expertise, we take it as given and trust that we are being given something that will make us better. However, we all know that, whatever drug we take, there is always a risk of side effects. Perhaps we should all, in our own way, use our voice to encourage patients to think widely about risk.

Let us be frank: there is risk in taking an aspirin or a paracetamol, and more sophisticated drugs carry even more risks. We would all be better at looking after our own health if we were prepared to have two-way conversations with medical professionals when we ask for their help so that we do not end up with the upsetting stories my hon. Friend shared with us today. I thank him for bringing the issue to my attention, and I will reflect on his comments.

Question put and agreed to.

Hospitality Sector: Tipping

4.29 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the regulation of tipping practices in the hospitality sector.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger.

A few months ago, a local newspaper in Bristol, the Bristol Post, exposed a tipping practice at a local chain of restaurants called Aqua Italia that involved managers levying a 3% charge on all table orders regardless of tips received. In practice, that meant that waiters and waitresses could, on occasion, be asked to go to the cashpoint after their shift to withdraw their own money to pay the levy to their employers, even if they did not have any tips themselves. Those funds were then recycled to help pay the wage bill—in essence, charging workers to work.

Amazingly, I am told that that is apparently legal—that is, if, in a reference period, such as a weekly pay period, the average hourly wage after deductions does not fall below the national minimum wage, it is legal, but if it does fall below the national minimum wage, it is not. That is because there are no useful laws on the regulation of tips in the hospitality sector or, as in the case of Aqua Italia, on charging workers to work. Enforcement can happen only if it is related to the national minimum wage. That seems an enormous loophole that should be closed, because this is an issue not only at Aqua Italia. As the BBC “Inside Out West” investigatory team found in its documentary, it has been happening at other restaurants too, including the national chain Turtle Bay, which has a restaurant in Bristol.

The offensive practice of charging workers to work and the exploitation of low-paid hospitality workers through an abuse of power in the use of tips is not new news. In 2015, it became clear that Turtle Bay—again—as well as Jamie’s Italian, Wahaca, Gaucho and Las Iguanas were taking the same approach with their staff, yet while many of them changed their policy in the face of public pressure at that time, to my knowledge Turtle Bay chose not to. The Bristol Post reports that Turtle Bay has franchised this policy to other restaurants it is involved with, such as Aqua Italia. The fact of the matter is that laws need to be in place, because even in the face of public pressure some restaurant owners decided to ignore it and carry on regardless.

Following those issues, the Cameron Government undertook a consultation on how to reform the regulations surrounding the use of tips in the hospitality sector. Three years on, to my knowledge, nothing has happened with that consultation or its output, even though hon. Friends such as my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) have tabled amendments and had meetings with previous Ministers on the issue. The consultation sought to do two things: make it clear to customers what happens to the tips they give and ensure that staff get a fair share of those tips.

Some restaurants charge an administration fee on tips to cover the costs of the card transaction when someone tips with a card payment instead of cash. That sounds perfectly reasonable, but the administration fee can sometimes be as high as 16%, when the real cost of the transaction to the card payment company is somewhere...
between 0.2% and 0.9%. For workers who earn, on average, £7.71 an hour, that is again entirely unacceptable and an imbalance of power, given that waiting staff have no power to change it.

The question must be what Government should do about that. In my view, it is quite simple: the law should make it clear that workers get to keep 100% of their tips, and in circumstances where there are card payments to facilitate that tipping, the at-cost use of that machine could rightly be passed on, but at the cost the restaurant is charged, not at a higher cost so that the restaurant takes a further share of those waiters’ tips.

**Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): On that point, the percentage that appears on a bill in a restaurant is sometimes classified as a tip, not an administrative charge. I am not aware that that is regularly passed on to the staff who carry out the service. Does my hon. Friend agree that there needs to be greater clarity to ensure that the staff get the amount that is warranted for the service they provide?

**Darren Jones**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Going to the heart of the original consultation on this matter, there are two edges to that sword. One is that workers need to be getting the tips that customers feel are being given as tips, but the other is that customers need to understand what is happening with those tips. Often, when we pay bills in restaurants, that is in very small fine print and there is different use of language about administration charges and service charges. Some people do not know whether they are discretionary, and ultimately they do not know whether the tips go through to the staff who have provided them with an excellent service and whom they wish to tip. I hope the Government’s response today will pick up on some of those points from the consultation, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister on that point.

As with everything else, technology is changing the situation. One of my constituents in Bristol North West was recently in touch: she has started a company called Tip Tap, a mobile phone app that will allow diners to give their tips directly to the waiter. They can pay the bill to the restaurant, the waiter will get out their app and then they can pay the tip to the waiter directly. That seems an example of a good solution, but I still do not quite understand why restaurant owners and others feel it is a particular hassle to facilitate that process for their workers, who are often the lowest-paid in those businesses—as I say, on average, they earn only around £7.71 an hour.

This is a simplistic debate; I think waiters and waitresses should get 100% of their tips. If the Government disagree with me on that approach, I would welcome a commitment at the very least to revive the consultation from the ashes of the previous Parliament, respond to the submissions to that consultation and set out how they would seek to achieve those two objectives—customers to know where their tips are going and waiters and waitresses to get a fair share of those tips.

I hope that in seeking to achieve simplicity in regulation, processes, policies, technical solutions and billing systems, we could quickly move to the position that says, “But for passed-through at-cost administration charges, waiting staff get 100% of their tips.” That seems to me a simple solution that would close this legal loophole, where no laws exist today, so restaurateurs can get away with it by relying on national minimum wage law. It would stop the exploitation of low-paid workers in Bristol and right across the country. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** Before we proceed, I remind hon. Members that in a one-hour debate the Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen each have five minutes and the Minister has 10 minutes. Therefore, I shall call the winding-up speeches as close as I can get to 10 minutes past 5.

4.36 pm

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on securing the debate.

The hospitality sector has traditionally employed significant numbers of young people who, it is clear to me, are being taken advantage of by unscrupulous employers who use legal loopholes to maximise their profit at employees’ expense. The world of tipping is governed by custom and, as we know from visits abroad, it can differ from country to country. Even here in the UK, there is no definitive guide on when we should tip and how much we should add to the bill. In restaurants, of course, that is pretty straightforward, but what if there is already a service charge added to the bill? What about gastropubs? I do not want to come over like Alan Partridge, but it can be a little bit complicated at times.

There is one constant among all this etiquette, which is that people expect, when they give a tip to the waiter, that the waiter will get the tip exactly as it has been handed over. It should not be used as a way to subsidise employees’ pay, which is the situation we are in today. My hon. Friend eloquently set out what has been going on at Aqua Italia. I think that is a situation most customers would probably find objectionable if it were drawn to their attention. It unfairly penalises workers for events that are outside their control. They are effectively at the mercy of the customer, and of course the more the customer spends, the more they need to recover in tips.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for an eloquent speech. Students in my constituency got in touch with me about the practice whereby, when customers leave without paying, their tips and wages are docked for those customers. Surely businesses should be taking that on, not penalising workers who are already low paid?

**Justin Madders**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That practice is common in petrol stations as well, when people drive off without paying. It is not something that should be visited on the employees, some of the lowest-paid people in our country. It is not right or fair that they should be penalised for something that is entirely out of their control. There are other things the employee cannot control: what if the customer has a complaint about the food, which has been prepared by someone else, and does not leave a tip? What if they have had to wait a long time before being seated? They might be in a bad mood anyway and just not feel like giving a tip.
Those are all vagaries that can affect whether a tip is given at all, but they should not be used to undermine the lawfully agreed pay rate, potentially breaching minimum wage regulations. I accept, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West said, that it is quite difficult to reach a calculation and know whether the regulations have been breached, but it is certainly possible.

I have heard it said that some employees can end up paying more to their employer in tips than they actually earn in wages for their shift. Does that not tell us something about how this system is completely out of kilter? Conversely, if they do not receive enough tips, they can have money physically taken from them, possibly taking their pay below the minimum wage—albeit maybe not across the whole reference period, but certainly for that particular day—which could leave them out of pocket altogether.

There are other challenges like that, in the hospitality sector in particular. The practice of cancelling shifts at short notice can also lead to people being out of pocket. What kind of country do we live in if somebody can pay for their childcare and their transport to work, only to get to work to be told that they are not needed and can go straight back home again? That is not acceptable.

The blunt truth is that this and many other arrangements in some areas of the hospitality industry are just a scam. They are a device to increase profits at the expense of workers. That is part of a wider problem in that this sector and others seem to treat workers, especially young people, as a disposable commodity. This industry has always involved a fair amount of casual work, but there are companies out there that seem to predicate their business model on exploiting their staff. I believe this is part of a wider trend, which has crept into our economy over the last few years, that work is now insecure and exploitative, and it is not the cornerstone it once was to enable people to build their lives.

That culture has led to an explosion of zero-hours contracts: it says that anybody wanting to become a self-employed, that classes more and more jobs as self-employed, has months and have no guarantee of a job at the end. It is a ruse to take an unpaid internship, which can last for more than the minimum wage by calling a job an apprenticeship. It is a way the Government view work. We need to end the destructive combination of weak employment rights, greedy bosses and a complicit Government who are leading us in a race to the bottom—a race that will leave us all the poorer. If reports that up to half of all jobs will be lost to automation in the next decade are correct, we need a complete change in the way the Government view work.

We will have to undertake a massive, state-sponsored exercise to reskill our workforce and to develop a culture in this country that says education and redeployment will run through people’s lives. Three, four or five career changes will be the norm; at the moment, we see three, four or five job changes each year. There is no permanence. The state and employers should invest in individuals throughout their adult lives, reward effort with stability and let people have the confidence that they are getting a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work.

There are many other ways an employer can take money out of their employees’ pockets or get them to work for free: uniform costs, cutting breaks or even stopping pay when the restaurant or bar shuts and expecting staff to work an extra hour or two to clean the establishment. Those are all different ruses and different ways of exploiting people. Expectations are so low, especially among the young, that people do not expect to be treated any better. It is time we offered a better vision and a bit of hope, so that people do not see this way of working as inevitable. I believe we can do better.

4.44 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) for introducing the debate.

This issue first came to my attention when I attained my seat in the House in 2015. I was shocked to dine at one of the restaurants here and to find, when asking the staff whether they would receive my tip, that because I was paying that tip on a card, it would go straight to management. Following a write-up of that in the Evening Standard, there has been an improvement in practice. However, I understand from an update that I received from a waiter in the Palace that tips are now evenly distributed, but not until two months after the meal. Despite promises and commitments made by the House, some improvement seems to be required. I wonder whether the debate could be shared more widely than just in Westminster Hall.

Partly as a result of that furore, the then Business Secretary, who is now Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, eventually set up a review of the issue. I was disappointed to read that we still await a proper Government response, despite the Minister then responsible replying to a parliamentary question in December 2017 that they would get around to it at some time. Is that not the case with just about everything we deal with, unless it starts with B, ends with T and has an X in the middle? We do not seem to get responses on much, which is a problem for people in the workplace who are desperate for fairness and to see a change in the situation.

The national minimum wage is now £7.71 an hour, but a cleaner in a local authority, for example, might get the London living wage of £10.20 an hour. That is a

Justin Madders: A whole industry has built up over recent years that involves the chipping away of what were once long-established principles in this country—part of the social contract of our society. It is prevalent in sectors in which collective bargaining is not prevalent, so I say to anyone in this industry or any other to join a trade union, because unions are their best chance of getting protection in the workplace.
big difference. A lot of staff who wait on tables are really getting the rough end of the stick. We know from The Observer that, in one week, a restaurant called Las Iguanas took £34,000 from its servers across all its branches from a sales charge on servers. If that represents a typical week, over a year that would amount to £1.8 million. That was from a 3% sales charge, or 5.5% in London, which no longer exists at Las Iguanas. That shows that things can be changed and improved. It is often through these debates and coverage in newspapers and so on that we can advise the consumer on best practice. However, I understand that the 3% charge still applies at Turtle Bay, while a 2.3% charge still applies, as far as we know, at Gaucho.

There is a lot more to be done. I look forward to an energetic response from the Minister. I ask him please not to tell us that he is going to postpone the response to that review because we are too busy speaking about B, X and T. Could we please have a speedy response to the review, with energy injected into it? We look forward to his response.

4.48 pm

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on securing the debate.

The hon. Gentleman clearly highlighted a lack of basic protection in the workplace for those in the hospitality sector. Certainly, the only individuals providing that basic protection are in the trade union movement or organisations such as Better Than Zero, which operates in Scotland and is organised by the Scottish Trades Union Congress youth committee. It stands up against harassment in the workplace—there have been many complaints about workplace harassment in the hospitality sector—unpaid work trials and last-minute shift changes, and it exposes poor employment practices. Tipping practices in the hospitality sector are among those poor practices.

However, I have a wider concern: national minimum wage compliance, and those in the hospitality sector who try to use tips towards paying the national minimum wage rather than, as should be the case, tips being received over and above the national minimum wage. But what chance do workers have when the latest available figures show that 25% of the posts in the national minimum wage compliance unit are lying vacant? There are 399 members of staff in the unit and 83 vacancies, so although according to the National Audit Office 208,000 workers are being underpaid—not paid the statutory minimum wage—25% of the posts in the compliance unit lie vacant.

**Catherine West**: Has the hon. Gentleman made an estimate of the amount of taxation that is missing as a result of the failure to check on who is being paid the adequate amount and therefore the amount that is missing from the Exchequer?

**Chris Stephens**: I have not, but it seems to me that if 208,000 workers are not being paid the national minimum wage and 56,000 workers are in accruals, who have been owed the national minimum wage, and if we compare those figures with the 4,504 full-time equivalents chasing Department for Work and Pensions social security fraud, we see that more resources should be put into ensuring that the national minimum wage is complied with. I think that the Minister is anxious to intervene.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy** (Andrew Griffiths): Let me enlighten the hon. Gentleman. The Government have actually doubled the amount of money that we are putting into enforcement of the national minimum wage. We have increased that to £25 million, and in the last 12 months we have helped to secure £1.2 million of wages owed to people who had been unfairly treated by their employers.

**Chris Stephens**: I thank the Minister for that clarification. However, the facts speak for themselves. Written answers from the Government only a few months ago have told me that the national minimum wage compliance unit has no plans to fill the current vacant posts. I am happy to provide the House of Commons Library with that answer.

The Minister says that there has been increased investment, but the 208,000 workers who are still waiting to be paid the national minimum wage may have a different view, so let me ask him what representations he is making to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to enforce the national minimum wage appropriately in the hospitality sector and what representations he is making to ensure that HMRC is fully staffed and equipped for enforcement of the national minimum wage in that sector. The Low Pay Commission estimates that 1.9 million workers in the UK are currently on or just above national minimum wage rates. That figure is expected to increase, by the year 2020, to 3.4 million workers earning the national minimum wage or just above it, so we need strong action from the Government to enforce the national minimum wage.

On the issue of tipping and gratuities itself, as the hon. Members for Bristol North West and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) have outlined, the Government need to get a grip on what credit card payments mean for the workforce—what that means for the worker in practice needs to be made clear to consumers and others. In my view, it is certainly a breach of consumer protection regulations if consumers are being told that tips from credit card payments are going to staff when they are not. I think that the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green has identified such a practice, and I hope that it will be brought to the attention of the House of Commons Commission. It concerns me; I think that if there are facilities in this place where that is happening, hon. Members have a duty and responsibility to ensure that the House of Commons Commission is aware of those allegations and they are fully investigated.

Will the Minister advise us of the steps that he is taking to tighten the regulations in relation to customer credit card payments? I ask because it seems to me that that is a device to ensure that money is not going into workers’ pockets and that the so-called tips are actually an admin fee, as the hon. Member for Bristol North West outlined.

**Thanhgam Debbonaire**: The hon. Gentleman is making a very clear case. Does he agree that this issue is particularly pressing and urgent, given that nowadays so many people and, in particular, young people do not carry cash?
If they are simply using chip and PIN or contactless, which an awful lot of people do, there is no alternative—and people do want to tip someone who has given good service.

Chris Stephens: I absolutely agree. As technology moves on in relation to payment methods, it is a matter of urgency that these practices are addressed and real action is taken. This can be interpreted not just as a consumer protection issue, but as an issue for the workers. The employer is in breach of the Employment Rights Act 1996 if there is evidence of tips not going to them.

I thank the hon. Member for Bristol North West for securing the debate. He gave some shocking examples of events in the city of Bristol. I fear that the practice is operating not only in the city of Bristol but elsewhere in the UK, because we have a Government who like to deregulate things.

Finally, can the Minister tell us what the outcomes were of the long consultation? I think that the hon. Member for Bristol North West said that it was three years ago. It seems to be buried somewhere. Can we see what the outcomes of that consultation were?

4.46 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of Unite the union.

The practices at Bristol-based Aqua Italia, which have been so methodically exposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones)—I thank him very much for raising this important issue with the Government—and, of course, the Bristol Post are, sadly, part of a much bigger picture of exploitation in our low-pay economy. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) outlined so eloquently the multitude of issues in the hospitality sector.

When I was a waitress and then when I worked in a pub, it was quite a regular practice for tips to be used to balance the till if it was under what it should have been at the end of the night. The worker would feel like a culprit because their tips were being used; they would feel that they were somehow being accused of defrauding their employer out of that money. But with thousands of transactions, there will be mistakes, and of course it was clearly very unfair to ask the workers to provide the money out of their hard-earned tips.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend shares a very typical anecdote about something that many low-paid workers will experience; I speak as one whose first job was as a waiter in a well-known Glasgow pizzeria. The typical practice was to be paid a pound under the minimum wage and then to have a tip allocated as a wage per hour to bring the person up to the minimum wage, so patrons of the restaurant were unknowingly contributing to subsidising the basic wage of the staff. I would often tell them that by giving us a tip, they were simply subsidising the employer to pay the wages. This practice is absolutely disgraceful, and that is why the work of people such as Better Than Zero is critical to addressing the massive inequalities that we see in employment.

Laura Pidcock: That is absolutely right. My hon. Friend gives a terrible but, I am sure, quite common example of what is happening in the hospitality sector. I implore everyone in that sector—and in all sectors, of course—to join a trade union, because only through a trade union can they have greater workplace rights. Also, consumers will become more aware and ask questions about what is happening to the tips when they are in an establishment.

What happened at Aqua Italia has been very well set out. Most striking was the case of the woman who had to go to a cashpoint at the end of her shift. How draconian is that? What century are we in when somebody has to pay just to be at work? Of course, the mantra of this Government is that for people to get themselves out of poverty, they must be in work. That is clearly a story to the contrary.

It is astonishing that this practice is legal, and it is more commonplace than people imagine. Although it remains within the law to treat people in such an extraordinarily exploitative way, it certainly cannot be said to be moral. The problem in the hospitality sector was and is the chronic lack of regulation, which has meant that exploitation—especially of young people, who perhaps are unaware of their rights and of the benefits of being in a trade union—has been allowed to flourish. That shows that we cannot rely simply on self-regulation in that sector.

Trade unions have taken a special interest in the sharp practices used in the hospitality sector since at least 2008. In May 2015, after it emerged that restaurants such as Pizza Express, Bill’s and Strada were taking tips and service charge payments intended for staff, Unite the union launched a summer campaign against these practices. For example, Pizza Express claimed an 8% so-called “admin fee” from any tips paid on a card. That is a huge problem, which has been repeated. There was public outcry as the endemic nature of the problem was displayed and publicised via social media. The huge public reaction forced the Government to act. They launched this call for evidence into tipping practices, followed by this consultation. However, as has been repeated consistently: nearly two years on from the consultation, what action has been taken?

In June, Unite campaigners handed a 6,500-signature petition to the Business Secretary, urging him to release the Government report into tips, but it still has not been published. The petition called on the Business Secretary to give staff 100% of their tips with complete control over how they are shared, to ban the bogus tronc schemes and make the code of best practice mandatory. For every single day that goes by, more abuses come to light. The so-called “pay to work” schemes are part of this broader set of practices, which cynically exploit restaurant workers and customers, who are none the wiser.

Catherine West: Whereas previously a waiting job was done for a few months or in the summer while someone was a student, these days, with the flat economy we are seeing, people are working in the waiting sector for several years as a full-time role. Does my hon. Friend agree that we now have to get to grips with the situation, get some energy into this and really address the poor practices?

Laura Pidcock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. For many people this is not a stop-gap, but a career—they will work for many years in a restaurant, bar or pub.

Workers are charged fees, denied service charge payments, robbed of customers’ tips and denied tips by these bogus tronc schemes. A properly run tronc scheme—
a pooling system, used by employers to distribute non-cash tips for employees—should be genuinely independent, free from employer interference and involve staff, but many are not. Too many say that they get absolutely no say in how the non-cash tips and service charges are shared out, or who gets a share. We have to remind ourselves all the time that it is not the business of the employer to say what happens to those tips. Those tips are hard-earned by the service of that member of staff.

Unite has also uncovered something very important. A number of these bogus tronc schemes, organised through troncmaster consultants—quite a dramatic name—have been used by companies to minimise the basic income of workers in order to avoid liabilities on national insurance and pensions. One case of this was an advert for a sous chef with a salary of £28,000. Once taken on, the employee found out that their contract stated a salary of £16,000, with the remaining £12,000 being paid from service charges. If anybody thinks that these practices are tailing off, I should say that two weeks ago we heard about the scandal at TGI Fridays, the American chain, following the proposal to redistribute card tips from waiters to kitchen staff, in lieu of an increase in wages.

Bogus tronc schemes are among a handful of ways in which tips are taken from the pockets of waiting staff and redistributed upwards and outwards into the pockets of companies, both big and small. Trade unions are rightly pointing out that these schemes verge on remuneration avoidance, illicitly reducing companies’ tax liabilities, and therefore should be subject to an investigation by HMRC.

Until staff are given 100% ownership rights over their hard-earned tips, with complete control over how they are shared out, bad employers will continue to take the tips of staff—that has been proved conclusively throughout our history—and young people will continue to live with that insecurity of low pay and not have the regularity of their tips. As the unions have been urging the Government for a decade now, it is time that the Government showed some leadership and dealt with these egregious employment actions. The Government should be acting as a troncmaster—a fabulous word, which I had never heard before I started to prepare for this debate. There is a responsibility on the employer to clarify for the hon. Gentleman that I recognise the point he makes about the cost of transactions. He will also point out to him that income tax is due on payments where the employer acts as the troncmaster—a fabulous word, which I had never heard before I started to prepare for this debate. There is a responsibility on the employer to

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on his well-made speech. I am genuinely pleased that he has raised these issues in the House and given me an opportunity to consider them and respond to him.

I think this is my seventh week as the Minister for small business, who is responsible for this employment legislation. In that time I have had the Carillion case, the Matthew Taylor report and various other pressing issues, but I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman takes this issue seriously. He raises important points on behalf of his constituents—many of whom, as he rightly points out, are vulnerable—and gives us the opportunity to debate this issue today.

Conservative Members care passionately about the lowest-paid in society, particularly those on the minimum wage and the national living wage, which, as you will know, Sir Roger, was introduced by the previous coalition Government. The Government are committed to creating an economy that works for everyone. The low-paid workers who work hard at our restaurants, bars and hotels across the country should be paid fairly by their employers. There are no excuses for not doing so.

I gently point out to hon. Members, however, that the hospitality industry is a reputable industry that provides fantastic employment opportunities for many of our constituencies across the country. I declare an interest as the previous chairman of the all-party parliamentary beer group. I am a lover of our pubs and hospitality industry. Only yesterday, I spoke at an event, which many hon. Members came to, about apprenticeships in the hospitality industry. They are giving young people careers with great training and great opportunities to earn well and have a fulfilling career in an exciting and dynamic industry. We should not tar all employers who are working hard to build their business and employ people in fulfilling and well-paid jobs with the same brush as disreputable employers.

Thangam Debbonaire: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, but I feel that I must register that I have sat here for almost all of this debate and I have not heard a single person tar the industry with any sort of brush. All Members have done is to be very clear that where egregious employment actions do take place, they need to be rectified. I welcome the hospitality industry in my Bristol West constituency, but I just want employers to pay their workers properly. Most do, but some do not.

Andrew Griffiths: I am glad that the hon. Lady and I have found common ground on that point.

The Government are committed to creating an economy that works for everyone. That is why I was extremely concerned to learn from the hon. Member for Bristol North West about the working conditions experienced by some low-paid workers in the hospitality industry. I recall the period of scrutiny that the sector faced in the summer of 2015. Several of our largest restaurants were discovered to be abusing tips earned by their staff. I will clarify for the hon. Gentleman that I recognise the point he makes about the cost of transactions. He will also recognise that income tax is due on payments where the employer acts as the troncmaster—a fabulous word, which I had never heard before I started to prepare for this debate. There is a responsibility on the employer to
deduct PAYE, and we must take into consideration the fact that that will result in some payroll costs. Where the employer facilitates the amounts, national insurance contributions are also due. Clearly, it is important that any employer acting as a troncmaster fulfills their legal obligations in relation to the payment of both income tax and national insurance contributions.

The cases raised today are of exactly the same type as the 2015 cases, which are the reason why we had the consultation. I thank the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for his contribution, in which he raised important issues including the cancelling of shifts. That is a real problem. People turn up to do an evening’s work only to find that if the restaurant or pub is quiet, they are sent home without any further pay by their employer. They expected to do a four or five hour shift, but they may get paid for only one. I am delighted to tell the hon. Gentleman that, in response to the Matthew Taylor report, we are looking at exactly that: the asymmetry between the flexibility required of workers, particularly those on zero-hours contracts, and the employers that can send employees home at will.

**Laura Pidcock:** Was that a sneaky preview of policy that will be coming from the Government? Are they going to ban zero-hours contracts?

**Andrew Griffiths:** I point out to the hon. Lady that for many people who are employed on them, zero-hours contracts are exactly what they want. I recognise that is not the case for everybody, but all the consultations show that for many people zero-hours contracts provide the flexibility that they are looking for. That is not to say there may not be an argument for some sort of enhancement or bonus for those workers’ flexibility. That is why, following Matthew Taylor’s report, we asked the Low Pay Commission to look at whether those on zero-hours contracts who have to offer such flexibility should receive an enhancement on their wages as a repayment for it.

**Chris Stephens:** The Minister is, rather suspiciously, discussing much of the content of the Workers (Definition and Rights) Bill, such as shift changes and zero-hours contracts. He has promised me a meeting, but I do not yet have an invitation to see him to discuss these matters. When should I expect to receive an invitation?

**Andrew Griffiths:** I am sure that, as we speak, an invitation is winging its way through the ether to set that up. It is always a delight to talk to the hon. Gentleman, and I am keen to talk to him about his Bill. Perhaps this is the perfect point for me to address some of the issues that he raised in his thoughtful speech, particularly the enforcement of the national minimum wage laws.

The Government have doubled our investment in enforcement of the national minimum wage to £25.3 million a year. That means we have recruited an additional workforce, and around 400 people now work on the enforcement of the national minimum wage. Recruiting additional tax staff takes time, and new vacancies appear. We are committed to continuing the high level of staffing to support those who are being denied the national minimum wage or the national living wage that they are owed. I am delighted to say that last year we assisted 98,000 people in recovering the payments they were owed—up from 58,000 in the previous year—and I am sure the hon. Gentleman will welcome that.

**Chris Stephens:** I did say in my contribution that the minimum wage compliance unit hired 399 people. The Minister has just said that it hired 400, so I am glad that one person has been taken on. Seriously, though, does the Minister not share this concern, which many of us have? The National Audit Office says that 208,000 people are not being paid the minimum wage, but if it was not for the investment that he says the Government are making, that number could have been a lot higher—400,000 or 500,000 people.

**Andrew Griffiths:** I absolutely agree. I take that as the hon. Gentleman welcoming the doubling of the investment in the enforcement of the national minimum wage. I know that everybody is keen to hear my response, but before I go on I will deal with one further point that the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston made, which was about unpaid interns. I absolutely agree that people being employed to do work under the auspices of unpaid internships is—let me be very clear—illegal. That is why in the past couple of months HMRC has written to firms that are advertising unpaid internships, reminding them of their obligations. This is no way to avoid paying the national minimum wage. If we find that firms are doing it, they will be prosecuted for non-payment of the national minimum wage.

**Justin Madders:** Does the Minister agree that as Members of Parliament it is up to us to set the standards and not to recruit people on unpaid internships ourselves?

**Andrew Griffiths:** I absolutely agree. That old phrase, “Physician, heal thyself” applies here. We should set the same standards ourselves. I would point out, Sir Roger, that I do not employ an unpaid intern.

The Government are clear that all workers should be paid fairly and at least the relevant national minimum wage. For those aged 25 and over, that is £7.50 per hour. I am pleased to say that the Government will increase that rate above inflation to £7.83 next month, which I am sure all hon. Members will welcome. In all, increases to the minimum wages will benefit more than 2 million workers. That is a well-earned pay rise for them from this Government. I thank all the businesses that have stepped up to the plate and are working hard to pay the national minimum wage. The Government respond robustly to employers that fail to pay their workers correctly. We have doubled our investment in enforcement, as I stated.

A worker aged 25 and above must be paid that £7.50 by their employer. All income earned through tips must be over and above that sum. Let me reassure the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) that any income earned through tips must be over and above the national minimum wage. If any employee is not getting that, their employer is breaking the law. They should report it, and HMRC will take action to ensure that is enforced.

The hon. Member for Bristol North West raised restaurants charging a 3% table levy to their workers. That is a proportion of whatever sales are earned on the...
They have all the evidence the Government need. It should not take a Westminster Hall debate to legitimise the argument or add to evidence. It is an extremely serious issue, and the Government reserve the right to take action if necessary. The principle is that no employee should be abused in this way.

Laura Pidcock: I do not want to disrupt the Minister’s progress, but the trade unions have been saying this for a long, long time. It should not take a Westminster Hall debate to legitimise the argument or add to evidence. They have all the evidence the Government need.

Andrew Griffiths: As the hon. Lady will know, at the end of last year Unite the union, of which she has said she is a member, worked alongside the Association of Licensed Multiple Retailers to produce a new code of practice. That was a joint collaboration, and I pay tribute to both the industry and Unite the union for working in such a proactive way to develop a voluntary code of conduct. I also recognise that a voluntary code of conduct works only if everybody sticks to it. As we have heard, there are still companies that are not sticking to it.

The agreement between the unions and the ALMR about the principles that underpin good tipping practices is clear, and it provides great guidelines for how to distribute tips fairly among all workers, not just those at the front of house. We must remember that those working in the kitchen or cleaning tables are just as much a part of the service experience as those waiting on tables and interacting directly with diners, so I understand the need for the tronc system where tips are spread more widely among staff in some circumstances.

Since 2015, we have seen another change, which is that employers are noticing. Poor employers who misuse tips now face tough scrutiny—not only in Westminster, but under the harsh media spotlight. I am encouraged that newspapers raise the issue on a regular basis and highlight the points made by the hon. Member for Bristol North West.

Hon. Members asked when the Government would formally respond to the consultation on tipping. I have listened to the calls for further action from the Government; many would like to see an outright ban on employers making deductions from tips or levying table charges. It is an extremely serious issue, and the Government reserve the right to take action or to legislate if necessary. The evidence that we have heard clearly indicates that the Government need to look at it very closely and to take action if necessary.

Let me be clear: we are not ruling out legislating to solve the problem. Workers should be treated fairly, and I am clear that it is unfair for employers to pocket a huge proportion of the tips earned by staff. Furthermore, employers who play fair are rewarded compared with unscrupulous employers. It is a competitive market. We have heard the figures for how much unscrupulous restauranteurs and people in the industry can make as a result of that kind of scheme, which provides them with an unfair advantage in the marketplace among their competitors who are doing the right thing. I am very mindful of that, so we will remedy the situation if the industry does not act on the abuses that are sometimes reported.

Naturally, all options for Government action carry costs and benefits. It is important to get it right so any action is targeted and benefits the workers, while burdens on legitimate, well-meaning businesses are minimised. Employers should not be out of pocket, and I entirely accept that they may need to retain a small proportion of tips to cover the administrative cost of processing them, as I said earlier.

There are many examples of good employers who act entirely fairly about their staff’s tips and who recognise that treating workers fairly is part of running a productive and happy workplace. Ultimately, it is up to employers to make a compelling offer if they want to attract and retain the best staff.

I thank the hon. Member for Bristol North West for securing the debate and for the collaborative way in which he has raised these issues. I look forward to working with him on them in the weeks to come. It is right to call out abuses of tipping and the exploitation of workers in the hospitality sector, and more widely.

It is the responsibility of all employers to pay their staff fairly, and at least to pay them the national minimum wage. Hon. Members should be clear that if that is not happening, the Government will act if necessary. Our policy is that employers should not make unfair and unreasonable deductions from tips. We reserve the right to introduce further sanctions against employers who fail to comply with that basic principle of fairness.

Chris Stephens: On a point of order, Sir Roger. I wanted to wait until the Minister had finished, so I apologise to the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones). Some allegations were made in relation to hospitality establishments. Could you remind us of what action you or other hon. Members can take to raise that with the Commission?

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): That is not a point of order for the Chair. The Minister has wound up his speech, but I think he indicated during his remarks that he would address that issue.

5.24 pm

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend and other hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. With respect, the Minister’s winding up speech was much like his Department’s consultation: it went on for quite some time but gave no answers. I am disappointed with that because I am a man of definitions, as I said in the main Chamber on Monday. I like answers that give clarity, so that I can pass that on to my constituents. The Minister used language like “If necessary we will act” and “We reserve the right to act”, but the comment of his that I will hook on to is the one about looking
forward to working with me in the coming weeks. We have three years of evidence that legislation is required, and I intend to follow up in a matter of weeks to see how we can bring the issue to a conclusion.

As I said in my opening speech, we need clear laws so that workers can keep the tips they have earned and so that we no longer have to use the phrases “pay to work” and “tip tax”, because those practices will be illegal and therefore not relevant in the United Kingdom. The Minister will already have been invited, but I invite him again to join me and others in Committee Room 18 after the debate, where he can hear from workers who have been subjected to this exploitation, from the journalist who uncovered it, and from unions and representatives of the hospitality sector—who, I should add, agree with us.

I am disappointed by the lack of clarity in the Minister’s reply, but I look forward to more clarity in the coming weeks.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the regulation of tipping practices in the hospitality sector.

5.26 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 8 March 2018

[Mr Charles Walker in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Energy Efficiency and the Clean Growth Strategy

1.30 pm

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I thank colleagues for being here today. There are some terrible weather conditions across the country, which I think will suppress attendance at this debate. Some colleagues had to get back to their constituencies before they got cut off, or the rail links got cut off. I call Antoinette Sandbach to move the motion.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddsisbury) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered energy efficiency and the clean growth strategy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I am grateful to the many of my colleagues from both sides of the House who helped me to secure this debate, not least to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe).

This is an important debate, and I hope that it will spur Members to action, not just today but in the future. This is the first debate of its kind in several years, and it is important to ensure that we keep energy efficiency at the top of the political agenda. This week the energy price cap Bill, the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill, received its Second Reading. The Bill is a vital step to protect consumers while we reform the market in the short to medium term.

I want to propose a long-term solution for energy efficiency improvements and suggest how to make best use of the time we will have with the energy price cap Bill to address energy efficiency. In my remarks, I will outline how far we have come and discuss the challenges we face, before proposing a couple of solutions to return us to a better low-carbon path. I plan to talk generally about the state of energy efficiency, but where I am more specific I shall be addressing domestic energy efficiency. Other Members, I am sure, will focus on other areas, but I shall leave that contribution to them.

It is important to outline how far we have come in building a low-carbon economy and in improving energy efficiency over the long term. That is testament to the commitment of successive Governments, and I am proud to say that we are now a world leader in the green economy. Since 1990 we have cut emissions by 42%, faster than any other G7 nation. We have outperformed the first carbon budget, of 2008 to 2012, by 1%, and we are on course to outperform the second and third carbon budgets by 5% and 4%, respectively.

All that achievement has not come at the cost of economic growth. Emissions dropped by 42%, but the economy grew by 67%. In 2016, 47% of electricity came from low-carbon sources, which was twice the rate of 2010. Household energy consumption has fallen by 17% since 1990, despite a rise in the number of home appliances. More than 430,000 people work in low-carbon businesses and the supply chain. All that work has resulted in bills being roughly £490 lower than they would have been without the energy efficiency improvements made since 2004.

Clearly, significant progress has been made over the past three decades. I applaud Ministers and Members of all parties for their commitment to tackling climate. What is more, we have taken those steps without damaging our economy, the idea of which was originally dismissed by some as simply not possible.

Despite such progress, there is still more to do. Progress on energy efficiency has slowed. Between 2012 and 2015 the annual investment in energy efficiency fell by 53%; and in the same period there was an 80% reduction in improvement measures, with the Committee on Climate Change warning us that that will decline even further by 2020. Fuel poverty remains a stubborn problem that we must continue to address. It is all very well giving assistance with bills, but a long-term solution—insulating houses—is surely the way forward.

As of 2014, 2.3 million households in England were in fuel poverty and 41% of the households in the lowest income decile were fuel poor; 56% of fuel-poor households lived in properties built before 1944. To my mind, those issues make it an urgent requirement of the Government to do a housing survey in England: 60% of fuel-poor households lived in inefficient properties with an E, F or G energy performance certificate rating, and 14% of households in rural areas were in fuel poverty, which is higher than the national average. Those rural households cannot access the efficiencies of dual fuel billing, and that is important, because many are off grid. Many cannot access the warm home scheme measures, which often involve whole streets. The low-hanging fruit has been picked, but the more challenging households, in particular in rural communities, have not been addressed.

The clean growth strategy is a welcome addition to the debate. I support its proposals to combat fuel poverty and to promote energy efficiency, but I hope that the Minister can be more specific about the Government’s plans today than they were six months ago. The Committee on Climate Change assessment of the clean growth plans today than they were six months ago. The Committee on Climate Change assessment of the clean growth strategy found that three actions were expected to deliver, six actions had delivery risks, or were rated amber, and seven proposals were without firm plans, or rated red.

It has never been more important to tackle climate change and to decarbonise the economy. However, the potential rewards have never been so great. A building energy performance programme could save households £270 a year on bills. Over the long term that would save even more than the current proposed cap on energy bills, and it would also make a large contribution to hitting our climate change goals. Bringing every household up to an EPC band C by 2035 would save 25% of the energy used by the UK, which is the equivalent of six nuclear power stations the size of Hinkley Point C. The net economic benefit of such a programme would be between £7.5 billion and £8.7 billion, according to macro-economic analysis by the UK Energy Research Centre, and that figure does not include the wider secondary benefits in growth, jobs or health. With cold homes in England costing the NHS an estimated £1.36 billion, such a programme would have a considerable impact on health budgets, as well as on the wider economy.
The economic and social case for increased energy efficiency measures seems unarguable. We must focus on how to deliver them. Throughout recent history, we have seen that the fight against climate change is most effective when Government and private industry work together. The Government can lead the charge, but we need to harness the innovation and energy of the private sector to truly succeed. That is why I want to suggest one way in which the private sector can step up. It is one way for the Government to make a change that can expedite energy efficiency improvements. Mortgage providers should give people more incentives to purchase energy efficient homes.

In essence, if people make savings on their energy bills they will have more money to service a larger mortgage, and that should be taken into consideration when banks make their lending decisions. We know that in 2014, 51% of fuel-poor households were owner-occupiers, with only 33% in the private rented sector. Were the EPC rating of a house to be included in a lender’s affordability calculation, people could borrow up to £4,000 more in many cases. Under such a system, an EPC A rating would allow people to borrow £11,500 more than an EPC G-rated house. I recommend to hon. Members who are interested in this proposal a report by the Lenders group, which said that energy bills were a sizeable part of borrowers’ essential expenditure, and were therefore a component of the affordability calculation that warranted being made more sophisticated.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): My hon. Friend is making such a good point about how we can challenge mortgage lenders to revisit affordability, based on how much it costs to live in a house. Crucially, it demonstrates to developers who have pushed back against higher energy efficiency building standards on the basis of affordability that lenders understand that reduced operation costs are a good thing, because borrowers can borrow more to pay more for a house that costs less to live in. It slays the developers’ argument against more stringent building regulations.

Antoinette Sandbach: I completely agree, and those houses would be more easily resold, too. The energy efficiency measures that had been introduced in a property would have a market value, and that would be taken into account in the ability to resell—particularly the increased borrowing capability. Furthermore, it would give real value when looking at the EPC rating for the future. It is a simple step that could be taken with relatively little Government interference—a simple statutory instrument so that energy efficiency could be considered as part of the mortgage affordability criteria would be very persuasive, particularly for those companies specialising in green finance.

Despite that, I also agree with my hon. Friend that we have to look at the criteria that we impose on house builders. It is simply not acceptable that in this day and age we are building houses that are likely to need retrofitting in future. By increasing the build standard, people would learn how an energy efficient home can have an impact on their life. I sat and shivered in my own home in London during the freeze last week; I found myself sitting in my sitting room in my coat because the house was so cold and inefficient. I now realise that I have a relatively fuel efficient home where I live in Cheshire, which makes a difference mentally, to comfort levels and to bills. Merely including the energy efficiency measures in affordability calculations would be enough to drive people towards more energy-efficient homes even if buyers do not borrow extra money, because they would be attracted by the perception of value implied by the higher borrowing limits.

My second suggestion is one that the Minister may be able to assist with more directly. When Members talk about infrastructure spending, one is put in mind of boys with their toys: big trains, roads, railways and power stations. However, I suggest that the Minister designate energy efficiency measures as infrastructure spending, bringing it under the purview of the National Infrastructure Commission. The rationale for that is simple: energy efficiency spending is a one-off cost, so it is closer to capital than revenue expenditure. By reducing energy consumption, those investments free up energy sector capacity. That reduces, or at least delays, the need for new capacity to come online. That new capacity—in the form of generation plants, networks and energy storage—would be considered infrastructure spending by the Government, and potentially would involve a large amount of Government expenditure.

Why invest in the big plant if we can roll out energy efficiency measures across the country, as part of an infrastructure project? Energy efficiency measures provide a public service: they insulate consumers—literally—against the volatility of energy markets. Likewise, they provide health and wellbeing benefits, by enabling consumers to heat buildings more effectively, and they have the knock-on consequences of reducing our carbon emissions and contributing towards our overall aim of clean, green growth.

Research by Frontier Economics found that a building energy performance programme would meet the Treasury’s criteria for determining the top 40 infrastructure priorities. The National Infrastructure Commission has said that it will consider “an ambitious programme of energy efficiency improvements” and that it “is examining ways to make the UK’s building stock fit for the future.”

I hope that Ministers will pave the way by committing £1.1 billion to a programme of energy efficiency improvements, under the auspices of the National Infrastructure Commission. It is estimated that that would leverage £3.9 billion of private investment by 2035. That additional capital spending, alongside the £0.6 billion already spent, would dramatically improve energy efficiency, bringing all the benefits I have outlined.

With the £1.3 billion of savings that have been highlighted in the health budget, these measures would effectively fund themselves out of savings to other parts of the Government’s expenditure. The starting step is to recognise that this is capital spending on infrastructure—not revenue spending. Members might like to look at the Energy Efficiency Infrastructure Group report, “Affordable Warmth, Clean Growth”, where they will see a detailed plan to take forward this suggestion.

I look forward to hearing suggestions from other hon. Members of how to renew our energy efficiency drive. The case for pushing forward seems indisputable: it would make significant inroads into fuel poverty and carbon emissions, as well as create jobs and secure clean, green growth for the future. Mine are just two
suggestions of how to approach that, but I hope that the Minister and her Department will take them on board. I am also keen to hear the suggestions that the Minister has brought with her; there is a lot of potential in the clean growth strategy, and I know that she is as keen as I am to see that potential realised.

1.47 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach)—I call her my friend because we serve on the same Committee and I have the utmost respect for her and her work. She gave a very impressive speech and I thank her for introducing today’s debate.

I want to focus my comments on the clean growth strategy—I am sure that other colleagues will do a far better job than me in talking about energy efficiency. I welcome the clean growth strategy; it sets out strong commitments to cut our carbon emissions in the UK and to improve energy efficiency. I thank the Minister for her recent visit to Teesside and I am grateful that she recognises the opportunities that we have there as one of the most energy-intensive areas in the country, as well as the huge potential to do something quite transformative.

The Committee on Climate Change has cautioned that there are policy areas where the Government need to flesh out the detail of how they will deliver on those aims of cutting our carbon emissions. We all know that there is no path to meeting our carbon emission targets that does not involve the decarbonisation of industry. I want to focus on that in particular.

In 2016, industrial emissions fell, but largely due to the closure of the SSI steelworks in Redcar. Actually, energy prices played a huge role in the 2015 steel crisis. In the UK, our steel companies were paying 80% above the EU median cost for energy—that is a huge factor in one of the challenges that our steel industry faces—but we know that we cannot meet our emissions targets without looking at industry. No one wishes to see a repeat of the 2015 closure of the SSI steelworks in Redcar, which ended 175 years of a major industry that built the world by providing the steel that forged everything from the Sydney harbour bridge to the new Wembley stadium. The loss of 3,000 jobs had a devastating impact on an area with a proud heritage and a proud history of driving the industrial revolution through steel production and its many other energy-intensive industries. We do not want to reduce our emissions through that kind of crisis. Industrial decarbonisation, done in a properly sustained, managed and strategic way, is the way forward, and it is a clear priority in the Government’s strategy.

We already have good energy efficiency action plans for several sectors, including cement, ceramics, oil and chemicals. That is a really positive start, but we need to go much further to meet the challenge. One of the easiest and most cost-effective solutions is carbon capture and storage. As the Minister knows, Teesside is hugely ambitious about becoming one of Europe’s first clean industrial zones and using CCS to drive that. The Teesside Collective in my constituency is ready and waiting to start decarbonising UK industry.

Teesside is home to nearly 60% of the UK’s major energy users in the process and chemicals sectors. To keep those industries thriving and to retain jobs, investment and growth in our area in a low-carbon world, we need to be serious about cleaning up their emissions. The internationally renowned North East of England Process Industry Cluster represents chemicals-based industries across the region, but it is concentrated in Teesside. The sector generates £26 billion of sales and £12 billion of exports annually, and is the north-east’s largest industrial sector.

The chemicals sector is up against strong international competition. NEPIC estimates that CCS could create and safeguard almost 250,000 jobs in the next 30 to 40 years. The Committee on Climate Change has shown that CCS could virtually halve the cost to the UK of meeting emissions targets. The UK is especially well placed to be a leader in the industry, not least because of the storage space in depleted oilfields just off our coast. The Library estimates that CCS could sustain up to 60,000 jobs and deliver a £160 billion economic boost by 2050 if it were delivered along the east coast.

The Government have promised a CCS demonstration project, which I really welcome. Of course, I sincerely hope that it will be in Teesside, but wherever in the UK it is based, the most important thing is that it comes to fruition. We cannot lose another opportunity. The new £100 million commitment that downgrade in investment to help to fulfil our ambition of being a world leading clean industrial zone, and I do not hesitate to welcome all the positive signals we have had from them so far.

The former SSI site in my constituency will be the focus of much of that work. Ben Houchen, the Tees Valley Mayor, issued a press release this week previewing an upcoming Government energy announcement about the site. We do not know any more than the details that appeared in the media, but they sound positive, and I welcome and support this. As the Minister knows, the former SSI site has huge potential for that kind of investment to help to fulfil our ambition of being a world leading clean industrial zone, and I do not hesitate to back it.

However, I am slightly concerned that we are racing ahead to make an announcement without necessarily having the means to follow it through. I would welcome more detail about that from the Minister. As she knows, the former SSI site is still in the hands of the Thai banks, and I am concerned that a premature announcement on what will happen on the site might push up its value and make it harder for us to negotiate with the banks and get the site out of their hands to enable us to carry out all our wonderful plans and projects. Any further information from the Minister would be gratefully received.
Finally, let me say something about our potential. Energy efficiency and clean growth are not only priorities for tackling climate change and poverty, but offer huge economic potential in jobs and investment in the UK. In areas such as mine, which lost 3,000 jobs overnight, every job is critical. We desperately need investment and growth. The UK energy efficiency sector already turns over £20.3 billion, employs 144,000 people and sells exports worth more than £1 billion. We are in a prime position, particularly in Teesside, further to increase the market and to export our skills and technology to the world. This is a chance to future-proof our industries, protect our jobs and create new ones, and ensure that areas such as Teesside can play as big a role in the industry of this country and the world in the future as they did in the past.

1.55 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), who has become the leading champion in this place for energy efficiency. She is at risk of being overtaken by the Minister, who is celebrated in all quarters of the energy industry. That is very welcome indeed.

This is a very important debate. I chuckled to myself at my hon. Friend’s reference to infrastructure projects being like boys with their toys. It is tempting when talking about energy policy to start with the wind turbines the size of the Eiffel tower in the North sea, the big nuclear power plants we are building or the transmission system. It is much less glamorous but no less important to talk about the other end of the system, where we can make huge differences in the amount of energy we use.

I happen to believe that six networks drive productivity in this country: road, rail, air, broadband, mobile and the energy system. The first five are discussed all the time in this place, but the energy system is talked about very rarely indeed. Energy got a rare outing this week, but in a consumer-focused debate about capping bills rather than in a debate about the wider energy system and potential productivity advantages.

A more energy-efficient system is important to our energy security. It was grimly predictable that, when National Grid released its warning about a squeeze on the gas supply last week, the headlines would scream stuff like, “Blackout Britain!”; and that the proposed solution would be more thermal generation from coal and gas. I argue that the solution is actually a more efficient energy system that allows demand to be shifted when those sorts of times come.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): Let me clarify for the record what happened last week. I was extremely concerned that consumers might be alarmed and worry about whether to cook their tea or turn their heating on. What happened was an entirely normal signalling: “Can anyone who is consuming lots of gas sell it back? We’ve got a spike, because we’ve got the coldest weather for a decade.” That system worked. Sufficient gas was provided. That is a tribute to our very flexible energy system.

At no point was domestic supply under threat. I have worked closely with National Grid to ensure that, should that ever happen again, those messages are put out much more quickly, because I do not want people to be worried about making those choices in their homes.

James He appey: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and she knows that she has my full, enthusiastic support on that point. The answer to what happened last week is not that we need more gas: actually, the system worked and demonstrated that there is flexibility. That more efficient, more flexible system brings with it energy security, and we should make that point robustly.

We should also be clear that a more efficient energy system brings with it reduced costs for consumers. Transmission and distribution costs are a not insignificant part of energy bills, so designing a more efficient system should be a priority. I will come back to that point shortly. It is not just price capping that can bring down bills for consumers: we could also find pretty significant savings in the costs of operating the energy system.

The other reason why we need a more efficient system is that, over the next 15 years or so, we will increase by an order of magnitude the demand we place on our electricity system. As we decarbonise heat and electricity, we will find ourselves significantly increasing the load, and the answer to that increased load cannot exclusively be more generation. We must seize the opportunity to create a more efficient energy system to meet that increased demand. For that, we must recognise that all of the clean tech coming along that allows for decentralised generation allows us to generate locally and use locally.

Rather than conceiving the national energy system as we see it at the National Grid control room in Wokingham, with its big map of the UK and its worrying about getting power from Hinkley Point to someone’s toaster, we should start to see it in terms of: what the net energy use is in someone’s home and whether they are putting energy back into the system or drawing down; and whether a community can service its energy needs and whether it is drawing from or exporting to the system.

The system would constantly balance upwards and, crucially, the distribution network operators would become distribution system operators, balancing the flows within their region. The national grid—if we need one in the future—would be left simply to balance the net flows of energy between the regions. If energy is generated and consumed locally, that must bring a significant reduction in distribution and transmission costs.

Of course, I recognise there will always be a requirement to socialise among all consumers the underpinning energy security that comes from a system that backs up when local systems fail. Such a system would bring huge reductions in bills and huge reductions in carbon—and frankly it would be an embracing of progress, given that all of this clean technology is coming down the tracks.

There is another area in which we could make the energy system more efficient: we should recognise that we waste a huge amount of energy in the form of heat. Remarkably few organisations that produce huge amounts of heat as a waste by-product yet understand their ability to monetise that heat. There are some brilliant pilot schemes that should inspire. London Underground has huge amounts of heat moving around its tunnel system underneath our capital city, and there are examples of it trying to get that heat out of the system and into heat networks on the surface. That is great, but such examples are relatively few and far between.
There are examples from heavy industry, where waste heat is being put into a heat network. Also, and this is a shameless plug: the shadow Minister and I—I will also demonstrate the non-partisan nature of the debate by referring to him as my hon. Friend—are both vice-presidents of the Association for Decentralised Energy, which told me the other week about a sugar factory in East Anglia, where waste heat and carbon is taken from the factory to greenhouses, where a prodigious amount of tomatoes are grown. That understanding of the value of the waste product and making energy usage more efficient should be an inspiration to companies all over the place.

There is also the electricity system itself. I understand from some of the distribution networks that the waste heat from the transformers when energy comes from the national grid into a distribution system is huge, and at the moment it goes out into the ether. Surely there is an opportunity to look at how that could be connected into heat systems.

At the Conservative party conference in Birmingham last year, a number of us were invited to go down to a combined heat and power plant beneath the library in Birmingham city centre. What is amazing in Birmingham is there is a network of CHPs—one underneath the library, New Street station, and a couple of others in the city centre—that generate heat that is sold commercially to the hotels concentrated around the city centre at a cheaper rate than the hotels could get for themselves. The hotels therefore get a good deal and Birmingham business gets a good deal. However, Birmingham City Council, which put the network in place, also gets to sell cheap heat into the social housing immediately beyond the city centre. What I love is that the system is not just more efficient and therefore bringing down costs for business, but allowing for social justice by delivering far cheaper heating into the homes of those who can least afford to heat themselves.

That brings me to the domestic energy efficiency market, and first to those who are fuel-poor and unable to pay. Clearly, when it comes to our intervention, we must look at two types of energy efficiency to support those who are fuel-poor: barrier technology to avoid waste, putting stuff into windows, walls and roofs so that less electricity is required; and putting clean tech into homes, so that they have more efficient boilers and smart appliances, which also use less power. This is a completely non-partisan debate, but I adore the scheme in Scotland—and not just because it is called HEEPS, which was my school nickname. All power to the Scottish Government, who have one of the world’s leading domestic energy efficiency mechanisms—the home energy efficiency programmes for Scotland—in place. I hope we can be inspired by learning about what has been done north of the border.

There are opportunities to intervene. Yes, we can make the point that it is socially just to do so, but I hope the Treasury realises that it is financially sound, too. In the eight weeks of 2018 thus far, the Treasury has shelled out £56,282,500—roughly—in cold weather payments to those who live in fuel poverty. If we were to intervene aggressively to make those in fuel poverty live in better insulated, more energy-efficient homes, in the eight weeks of 2018, there are huge savings to be passed across to the NHS system and adult social care by ensuring that those who are fuel-poor, those most vulnerable and those living on the lowest incomes are in homes that are comfortable.

There are productivity gains to be had, too. If people live somewhere they can heat and they do not have to choose between heating and eating, they will be much more able to go out and get work, be motivated to be productive and get promotion, which will stop them being in a position where they are fuel-poor.

I have three more suggestions. The first is about the winter fuel allowance. I am aware that it is probably a bad idea to talk in the House of Commons about a universal benefit to pensioners, especially when as a result of this suggestion there is a chance that some will not get a payment any more. However, we might start to look at whether to set aside those who we class as being fuel-poor—those who have qualified for cold weather payments in the past couple of weeks, for example—and make sure they still get a winter fuel payment.

For the remainder, however, instead of giving cash to be used against an energy bill, could we start to give vouchers for that value with which they can improve their homes with energy efficiency measures? They would get the same amount, and I would argue passionately that over time they would be delivered a saving from their energy bills far in excess of what they currently get with the extra cash of the winter fuel allowance. More importantly, still, whereas that allowance is given, spent and gone, with vouchers we would upgrade the housing stock of all the houses currently lived in by pensioners that, at some point in the future, will be lived in by people who are not pensioners. We would make an intervention using the existing universal benefit in a far better, far more economically different way, which would stimulate economic activity—all these people would move into the supply chain to deliver those energy efficiency measures—and upgrade our housing stock permanently. We should consider that.

We also need to look at how we do EPCs and the standards we set for new homes. In hindsight, I think we on the Government side made a mistake in reducing the carbon standards for new built homes. However, even if we leave the standards as they are for the moment, please let us ensure that developers are building houses at the EPC level they say they are. As there is so much discussion in this place of charities worrying about energy efficiency—they say that developers can say, “Everything we build is ‘The James’ is an EPC band C. Therefore, wherever we build it, it is an EPC band C, even if we cannot guarantee those properties were built to the exact same standards as the type tested.”

We need to ensure that all of the hundreds of thousands of homes that the Government are commendably committed to building are built to the very highest standards—at the very least, to the standard it says they are, that is there is too much discussion in this place of charities worrying about energy efficiency—they say that developers can say, “Everything we build is ‘The James’ is an EPC band C. Therefore, wherever we build it, it is an EPC band C, even if we cannot guarantee those properties were built to the exact same standards as the type tested.”

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2025 should be that a band C house has a smart meter within it. That would catalyse the uptake of smart meters quite quickly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury has already mentioned the importance of getting energy efficiency, and therefore operation costs, factored into the affordability studies done by mortgage companies. Nothing will bring the value of energy efficiency to the attention of homeowners more. I declare an interest here, insomuch as I am on the phone to my mortgage broker quite often at the moment and spend a lot of time scouring Rightmove, but nothing motivates homeowners more than when they are going through the affordability study and the mortgage company or broker is asking about the bills.

There is a hugely frustrating moment when the mortgage broker asks, “And what do you spend on your household utilities at the moment?” and the homeowner says, “Probably about £200 a month, but within the house I am building there are solar panels on the roof, or solar PV on the roof, or I want to put those things on to the roof or to put in a heat pump,” and the mortgage broker just moves on to the next question and shows no interest whatever in what they have just been told.

Antoinette Sandbach: I have been converted, having installed an air source heat pump in a very old property in north Wales, with 75 mm of internal insulation. I can virtually heat the house on a candle—it is not quite that efficient, but it is close. What is more, I get money back in renewable heat incentive payments, which means that my total energy cost has gone from approximately £1,200 a year to about £600 a year. It is extraordinary. It is a gas boiler that gives hot water on demand with no wastage and no heating up water unnecessarily. It makes a huge difference.

James Heappey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I suspect that we need collectively to convince our colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government that we can value energy efficiency and clean tech within buildings in a much better way. We must shift them away from an analysis that says that the affordability of a property is exclusively about what that property costs to own or rent. It is not; it is what that property costs to own, rent and then live in during the month that follows. With energy efficiency measures, we can significantly bring down what it costs to live in a house, and therefore make it more affordable, by more than the smaller savings we might have got out of cutting a few corners with energy efficiency when the place was constructed in the first place.

I have now unloaded all my bright ideas into Hansard. I believe that we must embrace this agenda and see that the renewal of our energy system is about not just building big zero-carbon generation, but making an energy system that is more efficient, that sees the value in waste heat and looks at how we use that more efficiently, and that is re-gearred so that it is localised and decentralised and we are balancing upward rather than downward.

We must see domestic energy efficiency as an opportunity to save consumers money in a far more meaningful, lasting and organic way than the price cap intervention, which we necessarily had to make this week, but which must only be short term. If we do all those things, we create economic activity and save money for both the Exchequer and, crucially, bill payers too.

2.14 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) on her efforts to secure the debate. I find myself in agreement with many things that she and the hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey) have said.

We can hardly claim that our country has been a model of consistency in its approach to energy policy and energy efficiency over recent years. Changes from one Government to the next, and even significant changes within Governments, have come thick and fast, all of which has led to a rather unsettling period in our approach to the subject. I recall a series of parliamentary questions that I tabled only to try to ascertain when and how the Government would publish and then respond to the Bonfield review. It was as if I was trying to get blood out of a stone.

The review was finally published in December 2016. While I acknowledge that this Government seem set to embark on a particular course of action on energy efficiency and clean growth, there has been a lot of time lost and it is still not clear to me how the Government will achieve some of their ambitions. To the best of my knowledge, there has not yet been any real opportunity properly to scrutinise the proposals set out in the clean growth strategy. That is one reason today’s debate is so welcome.

The recent report by the independent climate change think tank E3G has highlighted the fact that public investment in energy-efficient homes in England has fallen; I think the figure I saw was that it had fallen by about 58% since 2012. That seems to flow from the coalition Government’s decision to end the Labour Government’s Warm Front scheme, which offered support to poorer households for better insulation and things such as boiler upgrades. Of course, we also experienced what I can safely call the disaster that was the green deal. According to E3G, Wales now spends twice as much as England per person on insulation, Northern Ireland three times as much and Scotland four times as much.

In my own region of the west midlands, fuel poverty is particularly acute. We have the highest level of fuel poverty in England, with about 13.7% of households—roughly 315,000 homes—classified as fuel-poor. The newly appointed Metro Mayor for the West Midlands combined authority has recognised the importance of carbon emission reductions and clean growth in his aims and objectives for the area. I am interested to see what he will do, when he comes forward with his plans, to translate those into tangible results.

My understanding—I am grateful to the Sustainable Housing Action Partnership for a very helpful briefing—is that there are a number of encouraging activities, especially at local authority level, attempting to build on previous initiatives in the west midlands, with the aim of achieving a breakthrough in demand for wholesale investment in high energy-efficient housing stock and other energy improvement and retrofitting schemes. I think the hon. Member for Wells referred to some of the things he had
seen in Birmingham on his recent visit. However, SHAP is clear that, for real progress to be made in this area, there needs to be a strong promotion of housing as infrastructure, which is the very point that the hon. Member for Eddisbury made in her fine speech.

Indeed, SHAP actually looks favourably on some of the things that the hon. Member for Wells said he had seen in Scotland that had impressed him. It points out that that is exactly what they do in Scotland: energy efficiency is considered as infrastructure. A long-term commitment to energy efficiency schemes there seems to be leading to improved, high-quality planning, design and delivery schemes. There are things around that we could learn from, but they require some obvious courses of action: clear messages from the Government, access to investment, a long-term commitment and the seeing of these projects as infrastructure projects.

Energy efficiency is obviously a key part of the Government’s wider decarbonisation plans, as well as being one of the better ways to tackle fuel poverty. I hate to think what will happen when fuel bills land after the recent cold snap, and I wonder what we will learn in the coming months about the people who suffered during that period because of their fears over fuel poverty. I was grateful to the Minister for her clarification on the gas scare story, but one thing it exposed is how reliant we in this country have become on gas and how much of a need there is for greater diversity in our energy supply.

Other hon. Members and I are pleased to see the Government reaffirm their support for the EPC band C target for social housing and achieve? What particular steps will the Minister take to achieve the band C target for all homes by 2035 will actually be achieved? Is there an implementation plan to ensure that that is exactly what they do in Scotland: energy efficiency is considered as infrastructure. A long-term commitment to energy efficiency schemes there seems to be leading to improved, high-quality planning, design and delivery schemes. There are things around that we could learn from, but they require some obvious courses of action: clear messages from the Government, access to investment, a long-term commitment and the seeing of these projects as infrastructure projects.

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Other hon. Members and I are pleased to see the Government reaffirm their support for the EPC band C target for fuel-poor homes, and indeed their proposals to extend that to all rented homes. It is also good to know that the energy company obligation—ECO—will continue until 2028. However, we would all be helped immensely if the Minister put a little more meat on the bones. Is there an implementation plan to ensure that the band C target for all homes by 2035 will actually be achieved? What particular steps will the Minister take to achieve the band C target for social housing and private rented homes? What are her thoughts on phasing out high-carbon heating systems in homes? I would also like to know what is to be done to incentivise able-to-pay homeowners to make the necessary energy efficiency improvements to their homes; other Members have mentioned that issue.

James Heappey: I did not talk about the able-to-pay market, but I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has heard about companies that are starting to look at providing heat as a service? The consumer defines comfort, and the company then delivers that comfort, but the company takes responsibility for delivering energy efficiency into the consumer’s home because that is how it makes its margin when providing heat as a service.

Steve McCabe: I have heard about a scheme of that nature, but I have to confess that I do not know very much about it; I would be interested to learn a bit more. We definitely need to think about how we both improve energy efficiency and make it affordable for people who can afford it on paper, but who we know in practice can often find it difficult.

Antoinette Sandbach: One of the big problems is that many of those measures need to go in when back-to-the-brick restoration or work is done in the home, because putting in solid wall insulation internally requires re-wiring, re-plastering and many other things. There is therefore a need to incentivise homeowners who are making changes to their home to do so at the right time. I am not certain that I see that being incentivised by the Government at the moment.

Steve McCabe: I certainly agree. A lot of the low-hanging fruit has been picked and we are moving to a different level of problem, which I think gives us all the more reason to come up with practical, realistic incentives for that purpose.

As I say, it is good that ECO will continue until 2028. However, it is estimated that, to meet the 2030 fuel poverty target, the scheme requires funding of about £1.2 billion per year, as opposed to the current proposal to keep funding at about £640 million per year. I am curious to know how the Minister thinks she can meet that target with a projected funding shortfall of roughly 50%.

A further concern about ECO is that it is essentially a regressive funding mechanism. It pays for installing efficiency measures in fuel-poor homes by increasing energy bills across the board, which negatively impacts low-income customers who do not themselves benefit from the scheme. It seems analogous to the arguments about the cost of the smart meter programme, in that the cost of that is spread across all bills but without all people gaining the same benefits. That is something I have been looking at with some interest for a while now.

The hon. Member for Wells was looking for a way to vary the funding, and he talked about what might be done with the winter fuel allowance. I agree with the UK Energy Research Centre, whose recent report recommended that the environmental and social levies, including ECO, should be funded through general taxation rather than increased energy bills, which they claim would save the poorest 10% of households £102 per year while the vast majority of people would see no change to the amount they pay for environmental and social levies.

Claire Perry: This is a very interesting question, and I intervene to address things that I am not sure I will have time to come to at the end. This point has come up a couple of times, and I say two things to the hon. Gentleman. First, bill payers and taxpayers are generally the same people; we pay out of our pockets for both. Secondly, the problem we all have, as he will know, is that, regardless of which party is in power, it is difficult to hypothecate taxes for particular measures.

Some might argue—I mean no disrespect to our wonderful civil servants—that the Government are not the most efficient deliverer of such schemes. I will talk in closing about the reforms to ECO that we want to bring forward. However, getting energy companies, which know who the customers are, to target that money effectively and to commission and deliver what are often very valuable energy-saving measures for our poorest and most fuel-poor people seems to me a far more efficient way of delivering what we all want, which is people not living in fuel poverty.

Steve McCabe: I will certainly not argue with the Minister that the Government might not be the most efficient deliverer of schemes. I obviously concur with her on that.
My point to the Minister is that general taxation is usually graduated to some extent, whereas a figure applied to bills across the board is effectively a flat-rate tax. In that way, it has a regressive impact, which is the point I was making. I am certainly open to other ways of looking at this, and I hope we will hear from the Minister—I hope there will be plenty of time to hear it—that there are other ways that this can be looked at, and that the Government are open to them.

In its response to the clean growth strategy, the UK’s Committee on Climate Change said that an ambitious energy efficiency action plan for able-to-pay households is urgently needed, as well as a robust policy framework including incentives and firm commitments. It also recommend that we need some concrete proposals in place by 2019 if we are going to make real progress. I will be interested to hear the Minister’s response to those points.

I want to mention a couple of other things. The committee also says that action is needed in the private rented sector and that stronger regulations are needed. As the hon. Member for Eddisbury says, we need to find ways to incentivise homeowners to improve the energy efficiency of their homes. Fiscal incentives could include council tax rebates, cutting VAT on energy efficiency measures or a stamp duty rebate. As early as 2005, the Energy Saving Trust published research on the use of fiscal incentives involving council tax and stamp duty, and since then many other organisations have developed thinking on how fiscal incentives for energy efficiency could work, so there is not exactly a shortage of potential levers. I agree with the Minister that the process is not straightforward, but quite a lot of things could be considered and it would be good to hear where the thinking is going.

I would recommend that, alongside the fiscal incentives, the Government start to encourage other schemes. We should look again at the idea of zero or certainly reduced-rate loans, taxpayer-funded grants and mortgage-linked cashback schemes, to which I think the hon. Member for Eddisbury referred.

Something in which I am interested and that requires exploration is equity release schemes. They might be a promising vehicle for energy efficiency, because they would allow homeowners to withdraw some capital from their home for improvements that they would need to pay for only when or if they sold their home. Those schemes are considered suitable in particular for older, equity-rich homeowners—perhaps the kind of people the hon. Lady had in mind when talking about the scale of work that would be done.

Those people own quite a significant proportion of the country’s housing stock. Of course, they do not necessarily have money readily available for improvements, but they do have considerable equity. The Government should build on the work being done in Scotland. I would like to see an attempt at least to pilot an equity release scheme in England, and I would be interested to know whether the Minister is thinking about that.

The private rented sector has some of the worst properties for energy efficiency in the UK. Despite targets being introduced seven years ago to bring all rented properties up to EPC band E by 2020, 6% of private rented homes are estimated still to be in bands F or G. That equates to about 280,000 residences, which are often occupied by the poorest families—people who are forced into choosing between eating and heating. Shockingly, cold homes were found to be a bigger killer across the UK in 2015 than road accidents, alcohol or drugs.

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is introducing new minimum standards—from April, I think—stating that no home can be rented out if it is below EPC band E. However, the regulation includes a “no cost to the landlord” principle, meaning that if the landlord says that they cannot afford to make improvements or that they cannot get access to the energy company obligation scheme, they do not have to do that. I do not understand the rationale for that loophole. I ask the Minister to reconsider the matter, especially in the light of the questions about the availability of the ECO scheme.

As well as setting targets, the Government need to provide effective legislation and regulation, ensure that the financial frameworks are in place to incentivise able-to-pay households and ensure that private landlords are obliged to invest in their properties. It seems to me that there is a degree of agreement across the House on these matters. If we saw some progress on them, we could have much greater confidence that the Government would achieve their ambitions, and the twin aims of decarbonisation and energy efficiency, with the knock-on effect on the fuel-poor, would be things on which we could realistically expect to see significant progress.

2.34 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I, too, commend my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) for securing the debate. Many contributions have focused on domestic energy efficiency, and I will touch on that, but I also want to broaden the debate and talk about energy efficiency in the commercial and industrial market, which is crucial if we are to meet our emissions targets.

The clean growth strategy was introduced last year by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy with the express intention of accelerating the pace of clean growth, allowing the UK to meet its greenhouse gas emissions targets while ensuring that we maintain the strong economic growth that has been a key success of the Conservative Government during the past eight years. It is worth noting that the clean growth strategy has been introduced not to address an issue, but to improve, accelerate and maximise an already successful set of Government policies.

Since 1990, the UK’s GDP has increased by 67%, while emissions have gone down by 42%. In comparison, the G7’s GDP has increased by 61%, but its emissions have gone down by only 3%. That shows that the UK has led the way in growing the economy without jeopardising the environment. To put that another way, protecting our environment need not undermine our economy.

The argument that environmental protection is incompatible with a thriving economy holds little water. Our success in creating more jobs while reducing emissions shows that we need not choose between economic growth and environmental measures. The UK is therefore clearly right to seek to maximise the economic benefits of our transition to a low-carbon economy.
With regard to Scotland, energy efficiency was of course devolved in 2016, but energy policy is still a reserved matter. Particularly important for Scotland is the recognition of the importance of carbon capture and storage to decarbonising UK heat, industry and power. That has been mentioned by Opposition Members. For Scotland, CCS is a vital tool to reduce emissions, and the Minister should be commended for putting it firmly back on the Government’s agenda.

In the UK, we have world-leading oil and gas skills and infrastructure—predominantly based in the north-east of Scotland—which could be perfectly suited to CCS. However, the opportunity to repurpose many of those assets before decommissioning is diminishing. That is why putting the clean growth strategy into action now is vital for the UK as a whole. The economic benefits of CCS to Scotland and the east coast of England combined have recently been estimated at more than £163 billion during the next 60 years, making it imperative that we maximise this opportunity.

It is therefore worth considering the Caledonia Clean Energy Project, which could be well placed to kick-start the UK CCS industry. The Caledonia Clean Energy Project would see the development in Scotland of crucial low-carbon infrastructure that not only provided clean, reliable power to up to 1.3 million homes, but facilitated the decarbonisation of Scotland’s major industrial hub, Grangemouth. If that were not enough, the project could also produce enough clean hydrogen every day to power about 500 hydrogen-fuelled buses.

There is not a strict definition of energy efficiency at industrial level, but surely a helpful one would be the sort of energy efficiency that not only helped the UK to lower its emissions and meet emissions targets, but put the UK at the forefront of economic innovation in the energy market.

It is clear that Scotland specifically has the exciting potential to be a major part of the clean growth strategy, but if there is one criticism that can be levelled at the strategy, it is that it does not provide the sufficiently clear policy signal that investors in CCS need to justify what could be multiple billions of pounds of inward investment in the UK and Scotland. It is important to remember that although energy efficiency is devolved—we have heard here today examples of best practice in England and in Scotland—energy policy is still a reserved matter. That is why having a joined-up strategy that goes across the UK is so important—to ensure that we can pool our resources.

Where we have large energy assets such as nuclear, wind—we have world-leading wind farms in the North sea—and oil and gas, we can pool our resources, but we can also leverage some of the research and innovation that the UK is so famous for to promote micro energy efficiency and energy generation schemes and decentralised projects across the UK. The clean growth strategy seeks to promote that and it is a UK-wide strategy, which I very much welcome.

I would like the Minister to comment on how the clean growth strategy could deliver commercial-scale carbon capture to Scotland and other parts of the UK, before the oil and gas infrastructure is decommissioned and our best offshore engineers move abroad to work in other markets. Will she meet me and other Scottish Conservative colleagues to discuss the matter further?

As was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey), we should be looking at a number of different energy measures. As a strategy, it is right that we look at both the top level and the micro level. I will not repeat some of the points so articulately put by my hon. Friend when talking about decentralised energy schemes and micro energy schemes, but I will just add some of the geothermal schemes. Certainly in my constituency, in Clackmannanshire, we have been looking at former mines and whether it is possible to use them as sources of geothermal heat.

Claire Perry: As a matter of principle, it would be a pleasure to meet with anybody. As everyone knows, my door is open. Secondly, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) and I had that conversation only this week. I suspect that many people know about this whole geothermal mine water thing. I am really interested in this technology. If there are groups out there that are interested in promoting this and suggesting what can be done in a cost-effective way, bring it on. Let us look at what we have actually done—we have already dug the holes—and see whether we can get some more benefit for those communities.

Luke Graham: I thank the Minister for her intervention. Fortuitously, Clackmannanshire is up for a city deal, so there would never be a better time for her to come and get involved in these energy projects. I will definitely be following up with her on that as soon as we leave Westminster Hall.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): As we are all getting on this afternoon, I should like to invite the hon. Gentleman to come and see me in Southampton, to look at its geothermal energy scheme, which has been going since 1984. Unfortunately, it is still the only one in the country, but I trust that, with the Minister’s good offices, the geothermal schemes that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned could shortly get under way to join Southampton in its geothermal pioneering position. I really do commend what he is thinking about for geothermal. I think a lot of development is possible in terms of both mines and aquifers. I hope he will continue on his path of supporting that.

Luke Graham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and will gladly take up his invitation.

Antoinette Sandbach: Given the new Thornton campus in Cheshire, which is specialising in geothermal, may I suggest that on the way to Southampton from Scotland my hon. Friend call in to see some of the leading research that is being done at the University of Chester on the opportunities for geothermal and how we can roll that out much further across the country?

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Mr Graham is now going to make some progress.

Luke Graham: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind intervention and, again, invitation. I would certainly be keen to visit both places, as my constituency arrangements allow.

Scotland has been at the forefront of every major industrial development in the UK, from the industrial revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries, to oil and gas
in the 20th and 21st, so it has undoubtedly contributed to the UK’s emissions over the years, but it has fantastic potential, through infrastructure and existing expertise, to be the leader on the clean growth strategy in the UK, and to drive the UK as a global leader in economic growth through emissions reductions. I urge the Minister to put the entire UK at the centre of the Government’s clean growth strategy in the months and years ahead.

2.43 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. We should all be friends in this Chamber today. I warmly welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) has initiated this important and overdue debate. It is something of a scandal that the subject has not been debated for so many years. In this warm debate, I will give the Minister only a couple of bits of heat, which have actually been generated by the contributions of others, while I try to go through the constructive discussion we have had.

First, the hon. Member for Eddisbury rightly raised the issue of fuel poverty. She talked about the fact that this is an issue for many people, particularly in rural areas where lower incomes are more common and costs are higher. The weather is often less favourable and less warm. That is especially true for off-grid customers. In the highlands and islands, distribution charges mean 4p per unit more for customers than other parts of the UK, which is a particular additional problem. I call on the UK Government, as we have called on Ofgem and energy companies, to end this inequality without—importantly—increasing the cost for others: it can and should be done.

The hon. Lady also mentioned energy efficiency and the massive strides that need to be taken towards climate change goals. I was interested in her proposition about mortgage providers providing an incentive. That merits investigation, but I would insert a word of caution there. The measures used would have to be carefully thought out, because we do not want to see the unintended consequence that people who are trying to get on the housing ladder and get their first home are effectively priced out of the market by measures that may not be appropriate for their area and its housing stock. It is worth investigating, but I urge some caution.

The hon. Lady was quite right in saying that the onus should be on new developments to provide more efficient properties. Developers should take that up. I was caught by her comment that she was shivering in her home in London. I think it is quite unusual for people in London to find themselves shivering in their houses. When I was down in my flat last week, although we benefit from a district heating scheme, the insulation is so bad that it was actually very cold in the flat, because the heat was flying out of the windows. That is a good example of what happens. Is it not also the case, however, that that gives us an insight into what people in fuel poverty have to put up with throughout pretty much the whole of the winter? It is a good lesson for us to take away: we should be aware of the genuine suffering that people face through cold.

The hon. Lady, in her very good speech, said that energy efficiency measures should be thought of as infrastructure. I think that is a good idea, which is overdue for consideration. The Minister should take that into account, particularly in the light of the great heat challenge that we will have in the coming decades. It is an important suggestion, which should be taken forward. Of course, investment in energy efficiency creates jobs. That is a great thing to do not only socially and morally but for the economy. I think that is an important point to make.

The hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) talked about not being able to meet emissions targets without taking on the industrial effects, and she was absolutely correct. Industrial decarbonisation has to be accelerated. The whole strategy needs to be given a lot more—if Members will pardon the pun—energy, and the attention that it needs.

The hon. Lady quite rightly talked about carbon capture and storage, and about the Teesside Collective and the investment that is required. She should be commended for fighting for her constituency in that way, particularly given the issues over steel. Happily, in Scotland we were able to save the steel industry, with the Scottish Government working with Liberty Steel to take over the plants in Lanarkshire. It dramatically affects the wellbeing of industrial neighbourhoods if they lose that significant number of jobs, and they should be prioritised for reinvestment. However, we should be wary—this is one of the points of contention with the Minister—of promises of investment in carbon capture, because in Peterhead the Chancellor said that we would invest £1 billion in carbon capture and storage, but the rug was pulled away from underneath that project and it was left without that funding. It will be interesting to see the Minister not only make those commitments but follow through on commitments for the different projects. I will return to that point when I respond to the comments made by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham).

The hon. Member for Redcar talked about district heating, which has to come through far more importantly and strongly to support communities. There are great benefits to district heating schemes if they are got right. She and the hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey) also talked about renewable energy, which is very important. I think it is important to take a step back, look at both industrial and domestic energy in taking the challenge forward.

Another bone of contention that I have with the Minister—perhaps she will tell us what she will do about it—is the shabby treatment of the solar industry. Energy efficiency in commercial and industrial properties could have been greatly enhanced by supporting the solar industry, yet Government policy has withdrawn that support. Investments in new solar projects have dramatically declined—they have fallen off the scale—so I hope that the Minister will have an answer on how it can be supported.

Heeps—sorry, the hon. Member for Wells—said that big infrastructure was “toys for boys”. On International Women’s Day, it is worth pausing to reflect on that and say to the Minister, as I and others have before, that we need to encourage more girls and young women into the energy industry so that, large, small or however the infrastructure is designed, it is no longer “toys for boys” but “toys for boys and girls”. It is important we continue to challenge the language that we use, although I know that was meant in the best possible way.

The hon. Gentleman also discussed whether the domestic supply was near to crisis. I know the Minister answered that point; but I will pose the slight warning that, owing
to capacity, people in off-grid areas came perilously close to running out. Some in my constituency of Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey actually did run out of liquefied petroleum gas during that period. It was not job done. I appreciate what the Minister said, but there needs to be more focus on off-grid gas customers to ensure that we support them. I would welcome a comment on that either now or later.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman and I, and I suspect others in the Chamber, share exactly the same off-grid problem. It is a problem of effective supply. At the moment, heating oil is relatively cheap, but a couple of years ago the price was going through the roof, so we end up with unmanageable spikes in demand, although we have many collective buying schemes. He knows that one of the ambitions of the clean growth strategy is to phase out fossil fuel heating for new build in off-grid areas—it is simply ridiculous that we continue to put oil boilers in—and to look at how we create a cost-effective technological pathway. My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoimette Sandbach) has installed a heat pump, which, as she mentioned, can require a lot of reworking of a home, which may not be cost-effective. We are all collectively determined to solve this problem. To me, the answer lies in investment, innovation and creating some good routes to market.

Drew Hendry: I thank the Minister for that intervention. I understand that she wants to create solutions, but the proof will be in the pudding. I look forward to seeing what tangible measures come forward.

The hon. Member for Wells also talked about comfortable homes improving productivity. It is absolutely true. Studies have shown that in cold homes, children’s educational attainment is held back. He is right to point out that people are more productive when they have reasonable places to live in, and we give our children the best possible start in life when we give them warm homes to live in and have their education in.

The hon. Gentleman made very salient points, which I was delighted to hear. The voucher scheme for fuel-poor households is a really good thing to follow up—it is another idea that has merit and deserves further investigation. If something could be produced on that level, it could help a number of people and, as he said, improve housing stock. A measure that could improve things right away is the rapid acceleration of the programme to put the latest generation of smart meters into homes. A lot more needs to be put in to ensure that that happens much more quickly.

James Heappey: The key to getting smart meters into people’s homes is not only that the technology will allow all sorts of smart solutions that will bring down energy bills for people who are using less, but that the new tariffs being brought forward by the insurgent energy companies and based around half-hourly settlement will allow people to access cheaper bills because they will be in a better market. The more that we can all, on both sides of the House, encourage smart meter deployment, the better job we will be doing for our constituents.

Drew Hendry: The hon. Gentleman makes a very salient point. It is important that we encourage these measures, especially for people living in poor households, because they are less likely to take this up off their own backs. A focused programme and looking at how we incentivise this rapid uptake for poor households is very important.

Steve McCabe: I agree with the hon. Gentleman and others about the potential of the smart meter programme. Does he concede that at the moment the problem is that it costs households? They do not know how much it is costing them, because the Government will not release those figures, and we do not know how much the Data Communications Company is costing. At the moment, while the potential is there, we have a programme that looks as though it is not on track and could lead to an inflation of energy bills, rather than savings for people.

Drew Hendry: That is something to be aware of. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point and look forward to the Minister’s response.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned home insulation, which must be taken forward much more rapidly—I know I am using that word a lot today, but it is important because this is somewhere where we can make a real difference very quickly. In Scotland, as he pointed out, there is four times the progress on insulation. I make that point because it is important to thank the people, in particular in organisations such as Warmer Homes Scotland, who have been on the ground, working with consumers and making the breakthroughs by talking to people and persuading them to take on the new measures. If any hon. Member in the Chamber or anyone else wants to look at that, they will see the fantastic work being done.

Luke Graham: The Warmer Homes scheme was a fantastic initiative. I know that some of the terms changed in 2017 because a number of constituency cases were brought to me, with people sometimes being disadvantaged. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in working on addressing some of those issues to ensure we are still reaching as many people as we can?

Drew Hendry: I will come in a moment or two to what the Scottish Government are doing.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) talked about energy efficiency schemes, and in Scotland some of those are changing the housing landscape. I want to point out one of the commercial companies, a private developer from the north of Scotland: Springfield Properties. It is not only looking at more energy efficiency measures in its buildings, but in Perthshire, where it has a new development of thousands of homes, it is putting in electric vehicle charging points for every single house. That is a very innovative thing for a private developer to be doing, adding to the fact that Scotland is leading the way in electric charging for vehicles.

James Heappey: The hon. Gentleman is making another important point. At the moment, when new houses are built in England, I think they are being built with 2 kV or 3 kV fuse boards, but an EV requires an 11 kV fuse board. I do not understand why we are building hundreds of thousands of houses with electrical connectivity that is insufficient to charge at full flow cars that are very likely to dominate the market in future. I hope that our friends at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will amend that part of housing policy quickly.
Drew Hendry: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and I share his hope that people are listening to the need to adjust those things. To achieve the outcome of improving homes, making them ready for the future through energy efficiency and tackling the clean growth challenge, it is important to take a holistic view.

I agree with the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak about introducing grants, loans and measures to help people to gain energy efficiency but, again, it is always good to look at those kinds of ideas with real caution. His talk about an equity release scheme should give us pause for thought about its unintended consequences. It is a good idea that merits investigation, but we need to reflect on whether it is a position that only people with assets could access and whether we would be forcing people to release those assets, instead of promoting it as a core policy across the board.

I hoped that I would not have any heat from the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire, as is usual in exchanges between near-neighbours in Scotland, but he bravely brought up the carbon capture and storage challenge. I will not repeat my words to the Minister earlier, but in a positive sense, I ask her whether she will support the Scottish Government’s commitment to developing carbon capture in St Fergus. What will she do to put real weight behind that Acorn project?

My cheeky word of caution, which is in fact not cheeky but factual, is that in the vast majority of city deals in Scotland, the UK Government have failed to match the Scottish Government’s funding. If a city deal comes forward, I hope the hon. Gentleman’s constituency gets its fair share, unlike Aberdeen and Inverness.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman and I debate Acorn and St Fergus frequently. I will double-check the numbers, but my understanding is that the UK Government have put in £1.6 million and the Scottish Government have committed a welcome £100,000. We are absolutely keen to support those projects and we continue to be a major investor in all sorts of levels of carbon capture and storage; I will address CCS and its future in my closing remarks. I will double-check those numbers and write to him, but I am confident that we have already committed several multiples of what the Scottish Government have to that project—and quite rightly.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): We are all looking forward to the Minister’s closing remarks.

Drew Hendry: I have not even got to the bulk of my speech, but I will try to speed up. I was getting to the end of my responses to hon. Members’ comments, which I was certain we had time for.

I will finish on a positive remark about the comments made by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire. I am pleased to say that geothermal investigation has been embraced around the Chamber. I am sure that he will support the delivery of the Scottish Government’s ambition for accelerated clean growth in Scotland.

To aid the debate, I will cast aside some of my notes. As we have heard in this debate, much more needs to be done on energy efficiency. In my meetings with energy companies and climate change activists, they all agree on one principle: not enough is done for energy efficiency in our homes and businesses across the nations of the UK. Old housing stock is part of that huge challenge.

On new housing stock, I was struck by the comments in an intervention about new heating systems and new ways of looking after buildings that can reduce costs for people. When I was the leader of the Highland Council, I was pleased to be involved in a Highland housing fair, which adopted a housing development model from Finland. Some houses on that scheme were so innovative that it was reckoned that they would have average energy costs of about £2 per year, so it can be done with the right will. They have been sold now, so someone who wanted to see them would probably have to knock on the householder’s door. It was a good project, and the Minister might want to consider more innovation like that.

I will skip a page of my notes. We welcome the industrial energy efficiency accelerator, but we look for more detail from the Minister. We want to see how that will move forward.

My conclusion will not be too lengthy, but I will touch on some things that are happening in Scotland. Energy efficiency has been mentioned several times; it is fundamental to Scotland’s meeting its ambitious climate change targets. The Scottish energy efficiency programme route map—I am sorry to tell the hon. Member for Wells that its name is now SEEP rather than HEEPS—will be published in May 2018.

Last December, the Scottish Government published their energy strategy, which will strengthen the development of local energy projects, empower customers and support Scotland’s climate change ambitions, while tackling poor energy provision. Our ambition to improve the energy efficiency of Scotland’s buildings is central to our efforts to tackle fuel poverty.

On 28 February, the Scottish Government’s Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform published the “Climate Change Plan, Third Report on Proposals and Policies 2018-2032”, which details how the Scottish Government will meet their emissions target of 80% by 2032. With the Climate Change Bill, Scotland is sending a message that it is the place to do low-carbon business, which seems to be endorsed around the Chamber.

Energy efficiency is fundamental to Scotland. Heating and cooling Scotland’s homes and businesses costs £2.6 billion a year, and accounts for just under half the country’s greenhouse gas emissions. In June 2015, the Scottish Government announced that they would take long-term action to reduce the energy demand of residential services and industrial sectors by designating energy efficiency as a national infrastructure priority. Again, something that has been called for in the debate has already been done in Scotland. That was subsequently confirmed in the Scottish Government’s “Infrastructure Investment Plan 2015”.

Would you believe, Mr Walker, that I am going to cut my remarks considerably short? I wanted to go into a lot more detail about what is happening in Scotland, but given the response in the Chamber today, there is plenty of incentive for the Minister to look at that in detail.

As the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, it would be remiss of me not to mention a wonderful development: the Scottish Government’s dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness. The A9 is set to become the world’s—well, Scotland’s—electric highway because of the Scottish Government’s investment in...
ensuring that it has rapid charging points all the way along. It will be a real boon for the electric vehicle proposition in Scotland, and it is just the start of much more work that will be done there.

The debate has been very constructive, and I thank the hon. Member for Eddisbury for introducing it. There is still an awful lot of work to be done, but hopefully the debate has given the Minister a bag full of ideas to take forward and develop in future.

3.8 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): We have had an excellent debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Eddisbury for introducing it. There is still an awful lot of work to be done, but hopefully the debate has given the Minister a bag full of ideas to take forward and develop in future.

What happens to fuel poverty, if we systematically insulate our homes to an acceptable standard? What happens to bills in the future, and what happens, as the hon. Member for Eddisbury pointed out, to the amount of fuel that we are consuming in our homes? She estimated that a 25% or so reduction in gas as a result of insulating our homes to an acceptable standard has all sorts of knock-on effects for the wider climate change debate. As she also said, that is reflected in the clean growth strategy ambition and targets that ideally we should be aiming for as far as insulation in all homes is concerned, and in the earlier target of insulation up to band C for homes in fuel poverty.

I very much commend the target in the clean growth plan, but how do we get to that target? That was also a part of the hon. Lady’s and other hon. Members’ contributions this afternoon. We ought to dwell on that as something that we can all sign up to and aspire to. There is a long gap between that aspiration, where we are now and what has happened in recent times with energy efficiency and what we now have to do to close that gap. Among other things, we must make sure that we fulfil our climate budget obligations and make sure that what comes into those climate budgets from the energy efficiency contribution is as good as it can be.

Having congratulated the hon. Member for Eddisbury on her contribution, I want to add a slight note of sadness. Perhaps we should have all sat on one side of the Chamber this afternoon and addressed our comments to all the rest out there who did not turn up to the debate and who quite often do not engage with this issue. We might have collectively addressed the importance of energy efficiency not only in domestic buildings but in commercial and industrial buildings. It is important to work together to address climate change, fuel poverty and all those other targets to make sure we sort them out. Today’s debate has reflected the collective and consensual activity that we ought to organise among all of us, provided all those other people along the road support the Minister in what she is doing for energy efficiency.

The Opposition party must have the very best policies so that when our turn comes to govern, we have a clear understanding of where we need to get to, what we have to do and how we support and fund it. That is a job of work for all of us in this Chamber to get ourselves involved in.

The elision of energy efficiency and the clean growth plan in this debate highlights one of the central issues that will make or break our approach to making sure that our obligations under the fourth and fifth carbon budget can be met. I have said on various occasions that the really good news about the clean growth strategy is that it encompasses all of those things. The bad news is that the clean growth plan itself does not get us to where we need to go in terms of our obligations under the fifth carbon budget. I think the Minister accepts and understands that and has, I hope, substantial plans to add to the measures in the clean growth plan to get us to the fifth carbon budget target. However, I do not think we need to come up with a lot of brand new ideas to do that. We need to make sure that what is in the clean growth plan is funded and sorted out at the earliest possible stage and on the widest possible canvas so that when we come to put the sums together we will see that they add up as we go down the line.

I cannot emphasise strongly enough, along with other hon. Members this afternoon, what we need to do to meet the target for energy efficiency in homes. The hon. Members for Eddisbury and for Wells (James Heappey) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) all emphasised the components of the action that we need to undertake with regard to energy efficiency. The hon. Member for Eddisbury emphasised how clear-eyed we need to be about what it will cost us and how it will be financed, but, once that cost has been met, there will be benefits in the end. We need to understand that that is a pretty good cost-benefit analysis over the long term.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak reminded us not only about how the cost will be borne, but by what parts of Government it will be borne. He drew attention to how matters stand under the clean growth plan of action. I believe that there is shortly to be a Government publication on the plan for the next phase of ECO and how that will have its impact on energy efficiency. We have to be clear that even if ECO is extended out to 2028, at its present level of funding that will get us nowhere near to the numbers that we need to be energy efficient. There are still 7 million homes out there—the non-cavity wall and hard-to-treat homes—that have a far higher unit cost of treatment than what we might call the lower-hanging fruit of loft and wall insulations, a lot of which have already been done around the country.

Since some of the measures taken by the previous Labour Government on area-based schemes, including the enveloping of some hard-to-treat homes, there has been a 58% drop in treatments related to energy efficiency. I do not blame the present Minister for that drop. I know that she is committed to turning that around and getting a far greater number of treatments undertaken, but we have to face the fact that that is what has happened in recent years. We are starting our road back towards energy efficiency from a fairly low and, in some senses, rather dispiriting base.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak reminded us that when it comes to funding the changes it is extremely unlikely that we will be able to do it by heaping obligation on obligation in customers’ energy bills. I want to go further and remind hon. Members that we are assuming at the moment that action will be taken in a range of areas by means of obligations on companies, which will be passed on to customers in their bills. As my hon. Friend mentioned, we assume that the cost of the smart meter roll-out will go on customers’ bills, because the obligation on energy
companies to fund them will be passed on. The capacity market for procuring standby energy supply and new forms of conventional energy supply is, effectively, an obligation that is passed on to customers in their bills. The contracts for difference that we have already are also based on such an obligation—the renewables obligation—and the additional £557 million that is in the budget for further offshore wind. The warm home discount is in the same boat. If, as I understand the present plan to be, the energy company obligation is extended to 2028, that will also be based on a continuing obligation—it is in the name—that will go on to customers’ bills. Recently what was effectively a grant from Government to energy-intensive industries was converted to an exemption, which is to be funded by a levy on customer bills. There is a raft of such levies, and the number is increasing.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury set out some recent figures from, I think, Frontier Economics, and said that they were the likely real annual cost of getting us to an acceptable level, close to the target in the clean growth strategy. Her figure was £1.1 billion. From recollection, although I am not have the Frontier Economics report before me, that figure is a net one, arrived at after taking into account other contributions, including local authority and, as other hon. Members have mentioned, landlord contributions. The hon. Member for Wells—perhaps in future we can refer to him as the hon. Member for HEEPS—mentioned, and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak emphasised, the fact that landlords may make a contribution, but if they say they cannot afford it or get into ECO, they will effectively be given a free pass.

There should be a minimum merchantable standard for property for rent. Although it is true in theory that at the moment the landlord should not be able to let property below that standard, which would be band E in this instance, the remedy is enforcement at local authority level. We know what the situation is as to enforcement at the moment, given local authority resources.

Landlords do not necessarily have to stick at band E if they have spent, I think, £2,500. If they cannot get on ECO, they get a free pass. I do not think that that should be regarded as acceptable in the next 10 to 20 years. The landlord contribution should be doubled—and, indeed, the Frontier Economics report suggests a landlord contribution of £5,000 being factored in to the figures mentioned by the hon. Member for Eddisbury.

However, the issue is not only about that. If someone said, “I am letting out this hotel room, which has no glass in the windows, has cockroaches all over the place and has no sheets on the bed, but is quite cheap,” trading standards and various other people would be all over it. We need to get into the idea that a house being let in the rented sector with poor energy efficiency is a non-merchantable product and should be seen as such. A key part of a drive to make firm progress on energy efficiency is making sure that rentals in that sector are made on the basis of merchantable properties with good energy efficiency.

The figure that the hon. Member for Eddisbury mentioned can be upped a little in view of all the contributions. It comes to a round total of, I think, £1.8 billion. That is certainly what our party would commit to as the sort of expenditure needed to get to the level in question. I cannot see that that can be found by increasing obligations on bill payers over the next period. It must come from central taxation.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman is a sensible, intelligent man, but what he is saying presupposes that the prices never change. However, the reason we no longer have to invest so much of the £557 million in offshore wind is that prices tumbled precipitously, giving us more bang for our buck and enabling us perhaps to buy technologies that are further in the market.

Part of the clean growth strategy is trying to take that investment spend—the innovation spend that the Government are setting out—so that we can drop the prices of technologies significantly, and so that they no longer require a burden on the bill payer or the taxpayer, because they are sufficiently cheap. The benefits in reduced energy costs that my hon. Friend described mean they pay for themselves. Please would the hon. Gentleman get out of the world of equating the amount of money that the Government spend with the result that we need? It is actually a matter of how we deliver the most homes, well insulated and cheap to run, most affordably.

Dr Whitehead: The Minister is right, in that, obviously, area-based efficiency measures that uprate an entire area lead to economies of scale. Far more houses can be treated in that way than by cherry-picking individual houses in different places and dealing with them one by one.

Claire Perry: That is true, but surely the hon. Gentleman agrees that other people’s money will be better used if the underlying price per installation has fallen because of a completely different approach to cavity wall insulation or investment in solar-reflective paint, which is a technology being rolled out in other parts of the world—in other words, if we are looking at more cost-effective and innovative ways of doing things, so that the same amount of money buys far more installations on a per-unit basis.

Dr Whitehead: I surely do. On the basis of what the Committee on Climate Change says, the current ECO commitment falls way short of the levels of treatment we need if we are to get anywhere near our 2035 targets. Even the £1.8 billion figure that has been cited will not cover a complete series of treatments for houses in the UK. I suggest that making our treatments much more efficient—by doing them on an area basis, for example—would allow us to get much closer to our target for the same money. We can probably agree that £1.8 billion will be the sort of money that will get us there, but an efficient approach could get us so much further, which I would completely support.

As the hon. Members for Eddisbury and for Wells and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak emphasised, enveloping energy-efficient homes area by area needs to be funded from the infrastructure budget. It may not look like big boys’ toys, but it is absolutely an infrastructure project and ought to be treated as such by the Government. That would have a number of advantages for costs of capital, borrowing and all the rest of it; as the Minister says, we could make even more houses efficient for the same investment.
I appreciate that I have gone on rather longer than I intended, but let me briefly say a few words about the speeches of my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) and the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham). They both drew attention to the role that CCS can play, as did the hon. Member for Wells—or rather for HEEPS. I thoroughly endorse that line of thinking on CCS, but I must point out that as far as the clean growth strategy is concerned, £100 million will not get us anywhere near our CCS target, just as our ECO commitment will not get us anywhere near our energy efficiency target.

I congratulate Teesside on its comprehensive approach, in which my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar has been centrally involved. Teesside could be an absolute exemplar for the rest of the country in its combination of intensive industry with CCS and its by-products. That is very important for realisation of the clean growth strategy and we need to incorporate it in all our future clean growth plans.

I congratulate all hon. Members on their contributions to the debate. They all faced in exactly the same direction, acknowledging the importance of energy efficiency in homes, for a variety of reasons including climate change and fuel poverty, and the prominence that we need to give it in our policy debates. If this afternoon’s debate has hastened that process, we will have done a very good job between us.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I have let speeches go on longer than is conventional because we have had plenty of time. We have had two mammoth speeches from the SNP and Labour Front Benches. I know the Minister could speak for 55 minutes if she wanted to, but if she felt that she could just match them at 25 minutes, I am sure we would all appreciate it.

3.34 pm

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. You tempt me, but I will say what I had planned to about this excellent debate.

May I wish everyone a happy International Women’s Day? [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] I am so proud to represent my constituents on this marvellous day—a great day for discussing boys’ and girls’ infrastructure investment preferences. It is a bit like blue and pink jobs, but we all need better roads, railways and power generation as well as warm and well-insulated homes. That is certainly my focus.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) on securing this fantastically important debate and on her characteristically thoughtful, knowledgeable, well-balanced and well-researched speech. She is an extremely important member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, which has done such good work on the matter. It is striking that this is our second debate this week—after the Second Reading of the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tarriff Cap) Bill on Monday—in which there has been an outbreak of consensus. Long may it last.

Hon. Members across parties understand the vital need for action and the potential difficulties. A lot of sensible suggestions have been made about prioritisation, but ultimately we all share the ambition to secure clean growth for the UK at the right level and the right cost; maximise productivity under our clean growth strategy and our industrial strategy; and create a secure, diverse energy supply at low cost for our consumers. This has been a really thoughtful debate and many good ideas have been suggested.

Let me recap where we are. Based on 2017 data, the last time emissions in the UK were this low was in the year the Forth bridge was opened and “The Picture of Dorian Gray” was published, which was the year before penalties were introduced in football. I hope hon. Members from north of the border will already have got it, but in case not, it was the year 1890. When we consider the scale of the challenge, we should take a moment to think about just how far we have come: in a couple of decades, we have dropped our emissions to a level last seen in Victorian times. That has been achieved through cross-Government support for the Climate Change Act 2008, impressive work done by successive Governments on decarbonising parts of the economy, sustained investment and getting the costs of intervention to a market level, as we have seen so recently in offshore wind.

To be slightly partisan for a moment, I am very struck that it was Margaret Thatcher who made the first speech to the United Nations on the impact of human activity on the climate. She referred to sulphur emissions and acid rain, but since then we have realised the impact of chlorofluorocarbons, started talking about carbon and methane, and become far more informed. Only two countries in the world are considered to be doing enough to meet a 2° target: China and the United Kingdom. I would be the first to acknowledge the scale of the challenge ahead, but we should feel reasonably good about getting there and about speaking to colleagues and constituents about what we have done.

Before I plunge into my attempt to answer the many questions asked in the debate, let me refer to a couple of speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury opened the debate and the next speech was made by the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley). It has always been a pleasure to work with her and it is so wonderful to see her back in her place, standing up very ably for the concerns of her constituents. The opportunity to create a new industrial cluster on the SSI site that sequesters rather than emits carbon is incredibly exciting. Unfortunately, the hon. Lady was not there when I visited, but I was pleased to go up to see the site, work with some of her colleagues and celebrate a really good interaction between national Government and local government—having a Mayor for the combined authority is making a huge difference—and some incredibly effective cross-party working. That is a really important model for how we should be going forward.

Let me briefly address carbon capture, utilisation and storage, which is not the topic of this debate but is important none the less. We have a triple test for spending taxpayers’ money on technology. First, can we get the carbon down? Secondly, can we get the cost down? Thirdly, can we create a competitive innovation that we can then export around the world to improve productivity? I was not in my current post when the decision was taken on the council. I can say that the money that was not spent was recycled into the research and development budget, which has allowed us to have £2.6 billion to spend on energy innovation that is bearing fruit all over the place.
By the way, there are only 21 at-scale CCS plants working in the world today, 16 of which rely on capturing the carbon and using it for enhanced oil recovery. This is not a cost-effective technology that other countries are embracing with gusto. Even our friends in Norway, who are a little further along than us in building up the infrastructure, are struggling with precisely this point, which is, how much do we burden taxpayers or consumers to fund these projects? That is a real challenge. However, we are not going to bow down before it; we are going to embrace it.

That is why I have set up the carbon capture, usage and storage council—literally the best minds on this problem in the UK, and indeed around the world—to consider how we build strategically the case to carry out CCS in a more cost-effective way. We have also set up the CCUS cost reduction taskforce, emulating what was done in offshore wind, to drive prices down, not only in terms of the technology, but in terms of the financing, risk analysis and risk-sharing, which was one of the problems we had in the last project structure.

As the hon. Member for Redcar mentioned, I have set aside £100 million for CCUS innovation. That is not a subsidy and it is not putting money into a contract for difference; it is trying to create the innovation that we need. There are enormous opportunities to work with the hydrogen economy and with heating systems, to try to bring this work together. I accept that that news was a disappointment, but I would like colleagues to be reassured that we understand completely the need to decarbonise these industrial pools and to decarbonise further our heating system. Without CCS and CCUS, I do not believe that we can do that, which is why they are such vital technologies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) displayed his characteristic vision and knowledge of this sector. He said that we have been too focused on inputs, not outputs, when we talk about energy and efficiency. He also talked about the distributed energy future, which is absolutely what is happening both in our minds and the minds of the commercial world.

Of course, we already have solar. We do not only see a lot of solar generation on the very helpful national grid app, because it tends to sit behind the distributors and make its contribution there. However, we also know that we need to keep investing in this industry, which is why the smart systems plan has tried to set out the framework for doing that.

My hon. Friend also alluded to Birmingham combined heat and power, demonstrating that there are some fantastic examples out there, whereby not-for-profit or community-owned entities have already been set up. Robin Hood Energy in Nottingham also comes to mind, as does the White Rose Energy project. In those projects, there is real innovation, and local leadership, which we welcome. We have been supporting those things. I have just put another £7 million into working with UK100 to try to build capacity at a local level.

For me, most of this activity works when it is delivered in a particular place. It is very easy to sit in Whitehall and push out suggestions, but if they can be pulled through by a local authority, a local council or a local company, we can start to think about transport. How does transport plug in? And how do we deal with heat? That was an excellent set of suggestions.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) also spoke. I will try to reassure him that these things are not just warm words; they are actions. I think we are all apprised of the need to deliver. Perhaps it is because we need to maintain the UK’s leadership position in this area, which is genuine. Now, when we go around the world and talk to other countries about what we are doing, people listen. There were 70 people at the event on this issue in Germany yesterday, according to my officials, who said people are really hungry to learn. That is because the strategy is not just a piece of lovely paper; it is trying to set out a cross-Government set of actions that we have to take. They are not optional, if we want to meet our targets, which we must do by 2032 and beyond to decarbonise.

The hon. Gentleman and I share the aspiration around energy company obligation and fuel poverty. As the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) mentioned, shortly I will publish some of the ECO consultation and consider how we pivot ECO to focus on fuel poverty, while also making it a conduit for more innovation, so that we can reduce the costs and target it better. That is because I get invitations to join ECO through my front door. Why? Because I live off the gas grid, so I clearly fall into some category that says there will be some fruitful mining out there. I do not want to respond to those invitations; I want ECO to be targeted at the people who need it most. They may not be the ones who are currently in the frame; they may not be known. We know that local authorities know where they are, so we want to target the ECO system much more at those who need it. I will return to mortgages when I wind up.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) again made a powerful case for CCS and its importance. I think he also referred to the “win-win” of clean growth. We are not looking forward, as some campaigners might want to look forward, to a kind of deep green “lights off” future, because we all know that recessions are the greatest thing for cutting carbon emissions. We want the economy to grow. As he said, we already have 400,000 people working in this sector, which is delivered jobs and opportunities. Aberystwyth to Cornwall, and to many places in between. People have only to go to the Humber area to see what is happening with the support and the manufacturing of the offshore wind turbines for the wind industry, which is hugely transformational.

Of course, I also enjoyed receiving my hon. Friend’s invitation to all; we have had many invitations. Perhaps a Select Committee would like to produce a report on this subject, because its members could then travel around and take advantage of all these great opportunities.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry)—I normally never get a chance to say the full name of his constituency—gave a typically well-informed speech. We exchanged views on off-gas grid. I think that in both his constituency and mine, 15% of households live off the centralised grid, and we have to find cost-effective ways to provide them with more heating solutions in particular. Of course, all those people will benefit from the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tarriff Cap) Bill. Again, we exchanged views on CCS.

The hon. Gentleman also made a strong point about the Scottish Government’s plan. We should all be willing to learn from each other. There are so many good
people out there who are coming up with good ideas, whether that is at a local level or a national level, and we will be stronger if we pool all those ideas. Then we would not replicate what we are trying to do and spend.

The hon. Member for Southampton, Test again talked about clean growth being a strategy, which is important. It is not a plan; it is a longer-term strategy, deliberately for that reason. He also emphasised that there is strong cross-party support for these measures and, frankly, we will need that support. If we are asking for this issue to be a spending priority or a national priority, we will need as many voices as possible from all parties to make these points on behalf of our constituents.

Have I covered everyone? I think I have.

I now turn briefly, Mr Walker, to some of the plans that we have to implement this agenda. I was very interested—indeed, excited—to hear the conversation about whether this issue should be a national infrastructure priority. I know that the National Infrastructure Commission will report shortly. I will follow that closely and I undertake to meet the commission, because the case that was made for demand-side as well as supply-side infrastructure investments is powerful. However, I caution colleagues that that does not automatically turn on a new funding tap. There is no packet of money under the Chancellor’s desk marked “Infrastructure”, so this all has to be put through a similar hopper.

Nevertheless, the point about energy efficiency is excellent; energy efficiency is not only a strategic imperative, but an economic imperative. If we improve energy efficiency, we reduce people’s bills, create value, and create opportunities and investment for new forms of technology. We lead the world in many of these spaces, but we have never provided a really good route to market for so much of this technology.

I have talked a bit about what we have done, and of course we have seen household energy consumption fall by 17% since 1990 and the energy efficiency of non-domestic buildings has also improved substantially. Actually, the Government’s minimum energy standards, which we have put in place for appliances and for boilers, have had a measurable effect.

I would like to reassure right hon. and hon. Members in the Chamber on one point. People have asked, “Does coming out of the EU mean any weakening of these efficiency targets?” Absolutely not. Of course these targets are only achieved by more energy-efficient products being used, the average annual bill for dual fuel households in 2020 will be £100 lower than it might otherwise have been, and the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill, which we introduced this week—I was pleased that it received cross-party support—will also help to cut bills, as will the record low capacity cost of the energy that we are now buying in the market, as indeed will Ofgem’s announcement yesterday of further investigations into network company returns. We have to find a way to reduce the cost of energy right across the board.

This work does not just stop in the home or in the business environment. In the public sector, enormous efforts have been made, using the Salix programme, which has been highly successful in lending money for these energy efficiency measures. We anticipate a saving of about £1.5 billion for us all—for taxpayers—between 2018 and 2020.

So, we are moving in the right direction, but we have to go a lot further and faster. I completely accept this, which is why I set out the band C objective for 2035; that is the first time we have done that, saying, “That’s what we think ‘good’ looks like in housing stock.”

There will always be homes that are cost-inefficient to treat. There will also be homeowners who do not want that and will deny access. We cannot forcibly upgrade someone’s home if they do not want it.

Dr Whitehead: Can I tempt the Minister to have a look at a particular private Member’s Bill that is going through the House at the moment promoted by one of her colleagues, the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron)? The Bill suggests that the 2025 aspiration should be made a statutory target. Does she have any thoughts on that?

Claire Perry: Indeed. I have met my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) and some of those who support the Bill. I think it is an extremely interesting suggestion. I was able to reassure my hon. Friend that, given the work we are doing on ECO—I will come to that—and other measures, we will get there without legislation. That is always the preferred route, although having the overarching legislation of the Climate Change Act 2008 has meant that we have to deliver on these promises right across the economy.

I started to have the conversation with my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire about it ultimately being a win-win to upgrade people’s homes or buildings because it saves money. Someone upgrades their home and they save money on their bill. There is a commercial proposition there. I served on the Energy Bill Committee—the Bill provided for the green deal—and I had great hopes for it, but it did not deliver. There is an economic value to doing those upgrades, however. Some of it may flow straight to the homeowner. Some may flow to a landlord, in which case there is the opportunity to rent the flat at a higher rate or to have a different sort of tenant who has a bit more money. There are opportunities there.

We talked a little about the co-benefits of better health for the country from warmer homes. We do not cost those things, and we cannot necessarily capture the money in the silo of BEIS, but we all know that they intrinsically make sense. As well as supporting what is already happening through spending, which I will talk about, we are focused on trying to build a better market for long-term delivery of much better solutions. That is absolutely where we want to go.

James Heappey: I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister will certainly not make such a commitment immediately today, but may I check whether she will take away the suggestion I made about smart meters becoming a requirement for band C and above EPC ratings? Perhaps she and I and colleagues might discuss that as an option at a later date.

Claire Perry: It was an excellent suggestion, and I have already clocked it as one to take away. Indeed, I will be attempting to turbocharge the smart meters roll-out later this year, because we have done some excellent work that needs to be continued.
I reassure colleagues that the money we are spending on ECO, where we aim to improve more than 1 million homes, the money we are spending on the warm home discount and the money that we are already putting into the problem of fuel poverty will be spent in a way that tries to drive more effective solutions. One of the things I want to do with the ECO project is targeted at fuel poverty, which is a hugely important aspiration for all of us. I also want to try to have much more of it targeted at research and development and innovation. Technologies qualify in a very formulaic way, and I think we could do a lot more on that.

To reassure colleagues who have said the clean growth strategy is just warm words—I know they have far better things to do—on pages 132 and 133 of the document I have clearly set out the next series of things that we will do. People say that just bringing consultation forward is not action. I want to make decisions that stick over the long term because they have been widely thought through and bottomed out analytically. On pages 132 and 133 is a long list of things we have already done, are doing or are planning to do this year—so I am not getting away with a long target—to drive forward the ambitions on the band C rating.

We are also working hard with business and industry. While we have a real challenge in our homes, the biggest pool of emissions in the UK come from—it fluctuates a little bit between them—industry and transport. We have always found it difficult to decarbonise businesses. Part of that is process decarbonisation—as the hon. Member for Redcar knows, that is difficult to do without fundamentally changing the feedstock or heat source for a particular manufacturing sector—but a lot is just business premises. All the same issues we have in the homes sector absolutely apply to business premises.

Antoinette Sandbach: If energy efficiency measures have been rolled out in the home, surely common sense dictates that those people who have experienced them go into work and see how similar measures could affect their work environment. Does my right hon. Friend the Minister agree that tackling the home energy efficiency market would inevitably assist with the business market?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is absolutely on the money, but I would like to do both. I do not want it to be sequential. I cannot remember which of my hon. Friends talked about energy as a service. I thought it was my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire, but as I say that, I think it might have been HEEPS—my hon. Friend the Member for Wells. He is never going to live that down.

If someone running a small business is trying to do payroll and deal with potential changes in the regulatory structure for export, are they really going to sit down and think about energy efficiency? They might—I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Eddisbury that if someone has installed an energy efficiency measure in their home and has seen a material change, they might do that—but they might not. What incentives can we create and what market structures are already there that can help those businesses to focus on their energy efficiency? Many of the challenges in the rented sector that apply in the homes market also apply in an even greater way in the energy market. It is a real challenge that many firms occupy premises where energy is just part of the service bundle they receive, so it is not within their control to install such measures.

We are consulting later this year on a package of measures to help businesses improve how productively they use energy. We are focused on trying to do things that work, and that work locally.

Many Members referenced green mortgages and finding a way to finance such initiatives. There has been some excellent work, such as the “Levering economics for new drivers to energy reduction and sustainability” project. My hon. Friend the Member for Wells talked about being asked about utility bills. Actually, the way the market works now is that, whether someone is in a home rated A or G, they input the same number, which is crazy.

Work is already under way on mortgage lenders who might pick up on the fact that someone could save £700 on their energy bills by having a better energy performance certificate. The green finance taskforce that I set up with the Treasury last year will be reporting shortly. One of its strands of work is how we get green mortgages to be a proper retail offering. Some lenders have taken steps to support energy efficiency improvements. Last November, Barclays launched the first green bond from a UK bank, on the back of the work that the taskforce was doing. That is being used to fund domestic assets, which it plans to use to refinance mortgages for the most energy-efficient properties. That is a testament to the data available and the bank’s desire. It is common sense to reward that sort of behaviour.

I have talked a little about the savings and what we are doing. Now I will mention briefly the most vulnerable households, which have come up often, especially given the recent cold snap. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury said, it was really cold in many homes. Turning up the heating was an option for many of us, but we might not have realised that others who do so feel extremely worried about what their bills will look like.

I want to reassure colleagues that the warm home discount programme—£140 a household—continues to operate. Winter fuel payments are being paid, and the cold weather payment was triggered by the cold snap. It is absolutely right for the Government to continue to support the most vulnerable and to help them make improvements to their homes. Such people do not necessarily have financial choice. I was therefore pleased that we committed £3.6 billion to ECO. Going forward, that will upgrade more than 1 million homes. We will extend that out to 2028 with funding at least at current ECO levels.

I take the point about the landlord challenge. The problem, frankly, is that 95% of landlords have four properties or fewer—they are us. We asked them to sign up to something that at the time we had underpinned with a green finance offer, but now they are potentially required to raise capital to do it. We have to do things that are fair and proportionate if we want the country to come with us. The measure is still incredibly important. We do not want people living in the least fuel-efficient homes and we are determined to do something about that. In fact, compared with 2010, there are 835,000 fewer homes rated E, F or G in the UK, so we are making progress at the least efficient end of the market.
I hope that I am not trying your patience, Mr Walker, but I have two more quick points to make. The first is on smart meters. I think we are on the cusp of something really exciting with smart meters. We are absolutely in the world’s vanguard by offering every household a smart meter by 2020. I accept the concerns about technology. People say, “Why would I install one of these when I’m going to get a better one?” The point is that if someone installs one now, they get all the benefits immediately of understanding what their energy consumption looks like, and can work out ways to cut their bills. Furthermore, they will automatically be upgraded through the technology that we are putting in place to the next generation, so when they switch suppliers they will not lose any of that functionality. That is a vital step forward.

More needs to be done to work on the consumer proposition. I am desperate to put in a smart meter, but not to take a morning off work to do so. It is really difficult to find the time, which is a problem that many people face. We will be working with industry and the organisation rolling the meters out to see how we can make them more consumer flexible, and how we provide incentives, because plenty of money is being spent on advertising them. We are on the cusp of something very exciting.

I also wanted to mention fundamentally changing the way in which we build and think about homes in the construction process. It is astonishing that the way in which we build homes has not changed much since the 1890s: we build the foundations, and then get the trades in. We can build really high-quality modular homes—homes that are built off-site and installed—in a far more effective and resource-efficient way. We are working closely with the construction sector to see what we can do to turbocharge that.

We can also do retrofits in a modular way. Nottingham City Council and Melius Homes are taking a prefabricated approach to retrofit homes to 2050 standards, and improve their energy performance. A lot of innovation is happening in this area that I am extremely keen to support. That is how we create a new market for what needs to happen, while rightly focusing on building regulations. All colleagues will be aware of the challenge in the post-Grenfell world of ensuring that there are no unintended consequences to what we do with building regulations. We are working very closely with our colleagues in the relevant Department, and have reconstituted the inter-ministerial clean growth group, because so many of these challenges span across Government.

There is a huge amount more to do. We have heard lots of sensible ideas today, many of which are extremely attractive and that we want to take away. All of us want to get the costs and consumption of energy down, reduce carbon emissions, make our homes warmer, and make the transition to low-carbon energy less risky. This is not an either/or question; in order to meet our carbon targets, and to create a housing stock that is fit for the future, we absolutely need to do this. That is why the clean growth strategy is so important, and why the industrial strategy has clean growth as one of its four major pillars: things that we know that we can lead the world in, and that have to be done.

It has been a pleasure in today’s debate, as in so many others in this area, to work with colleagues across the House who are so committed to this agenda, and have so much knowledge and interest in it. It will really help us to accelerate the work going forward, so I thank hon. Members for the opportunity to respond this afternoon.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I think colleagues were almost heading for the door, but we have up to two minutes for the proposer of this great debate to wind up.

4.3 pm

Antoinette Sandbach: I thank colleagues from across the House for participating in the debate. We have now had three Front-Bench speeches that have referred to colleagues’ contributions, so I will not go over them again. I reiterate that there has been agreement across the Chamber: if the Government invest in this area now, that will lead to huge savings—£1.3 billion in the health sector alone, as well as productivity gains. In addition, it would generate a huge amount of jobs, and save consumers £290 on their bills every year.

I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to go to the National Infrastructure Commission, as she has promised. It is due to make its decision in April, which is why I asked for this afternoon’s debate to take place today. Given the cross-party consensus, I suspect that there may well be a cross-party letter winging its way elsewhere to Government, encouraging them to take up the infrastructure challenge and the opportunities that innovation in this area offers the UK economy. I thank again all hon. Members who have contributed today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered energy efficiency and the clean growth strategy.

4.4 pm

Sitting adjourned.
It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am grateful for and slightly awed by the array of right hon. and hon. Members present who have much more experience of this issue than I have. It is an extremely important one and I am very grateful to the Minister for being here. I hope that he will be able to address some of the points that I and others raise.

We exist at a time of the greatest turbulence and change. With Brexit, we have the resulting need to engage as never before with countries around the world. We see, never more than this week, challenges to the rules-based order. We see the rise of new powers, such as China, which is stamping its mark on the world politically, economically and militarily on a scale unimagined a few years ago. We also see the influence of political disrupters across western democracies. This is the time to challenge policy of several Governments and many decades that has led to a decline in our commitment to foreign engagement.

It has been a real privilege for me to travel as a Minister, as a trade envoy, as the leader of the UK’s delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and in other capacities, and to see at first hand the astounding professionalism of our diplomatic staff around the world. Numbers are not everything. Having a fluent Arabic-speaking middle east expert as our ambassador to Iraq with the President’s personal mobile number on his speed dial is of incalculable value. However, we have reached a critical moment in our ability to promote our interests abroad.

I had a conversation yesterday with Lord Waldegrave. He has spent time as a Minister in both the Treasury and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and he said, in a way that was somewhat light-hearted but nevertheless heartfelt, that in his impression there has been a multi-decadal battle between the Treasury and the FCO, which the Treasury has now won—a battle between the two great Departments of state that vie for influence with No. 10 and across Government. Two decades ago, it was deemed the right thing to hive off international development to a new Department. Part of that perhaps was a good thing at the time, but I have always felt that part of it was distaste for the concept that aid and influence could ever go together. For me, that has never been a problem: of course they can, and they should.

In some areas, the European Union was seen by some as the deliverer of our overseas influence.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): My right hon. Friend talks about the Treasury and other Departments. Obviously, the Department for International Development has had successive incredible spending rounds. Does he agree that the military attaché network, which he and I have seen in places such as Africa, does a huge amount of good in terms of influence and building those relationships? Surely, in countries that are basically aid-dependent, DFID should be paying for that network.

Richard Benyon: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Later in my speech, I will talk about defence attachés and how we can copy the way that other countries do that better.

I have travelled to parts of the world where the Union flag might exist in the corner of an island state’s flag but there is no Union flag flying over anything that could resemble a high commission, embassy or diplomatic mission. All aid to the Pacific region was delivered through the EU; I could not find one sign of recognition of the sacrifice that the UK taxpayer made to provide that much-needed aid—it all had the EU mark on it.

Well before 2010, embassies were being sold off. They were bricks and mortar whose value in terms of influence vastly outweighed their real estate value. Our missions abroad were reduced and our diplomatic service language school was closed. After 2010, some good things started to happen: the language school was reopened; embassies that had been closed were reopened. But what that really meant was that our diplomatic missions abroad were marginally broader, but shallower too. I was in Mali just as we reopened our embassy there. An excellent ambassador arrived and she took over with a staff of one locally recruited driver. According to the FCO figures, there are now three FCO personnel there.

This year, the Government will spend £2.15 billion on the winter fuel allowance—a welfare element that we all support—but that is more than the £2 billion we spend on our foreign affairs budget. Let us compare how France and Germany—two similar-sized countries, both in the EU—manage their diplomatic services abroad. France spends £4.2 billion on its diplomatic service—more than twice what we spend on ours. As a country, it has a clear view that in order to maintain its P5 status it will stay true to its spheres of influence. Our 30-year bout of post-colonial guilt syndrome in this country, which may well have abated now, never seemed to have a parallel in the French psyche. France maintains a very clear involvement and commitment to countries in north and west Africa in particular, but also across the middle east. It maintains a much more permanent presence in areas where it has a history of influence.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I am listening closely to what my right hon. Friend is saying. I believe that even some former French colonies are represented in the French Parliament, unlike here. At the end of the day, it is worth remembering that France has Francophonie; they look with envy at the Commonwealth, which is an organisation that they are unable to replicate. They rather wonder at it. I very much hope that my right hon. Friend will mention the Commonwealth in his speech.

Richard Benyon: I certainly will. Our commitment to the Commonwealth is at the forefront of our minds, with the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting about to take place. There are some very important Commonwealth countries that we owe more attention to. We must see this as a very important part of our foreign engagement in the years ahead. There has not been a more important time for the Commonwealth to
exist, and for the Government to have a clear strategy of supporting it both economically and using all the soft-power influence we can, to ensure that this wide variety of economies and countries united by a set of values can be a key part of our foreign engagement in future.

I do not know how many diplomats France deploys in the Central African Republic, Niger or Senegal, but I bet it is many more than the two we have in Lusaka, the two we have in Gabon or even the seven we have in Harare, according to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office annual report and accounts.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentions Zimbabwe; I was there recently and I noticed that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and DFID sit together in the same building. It is clear, when looking at it, what a remarkable success that is; they each act as a force multiplier to each other. It would be just as well if that was replicated the whole way across the foreign service.

Richard Benyon: I could not agree more. I saw a similar one-post operation in Addis Ababa, where our excellent ambassador, Susanna Moorehead, has forged a team that includes representatives of DFID, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Trade into one cohesive force. They certainly punch above their weight, and they are able to influence things as a result. I particularly note what my right hon. Friend said about Zimbabwe. There has never been a more important time for us to engage there. If we allow ourselves to be optimistic, there is the chance that Zimbabwe will emerge from the tragedy of recent decades.

Richard Benyon: I could not agree more. I saw a similar one-post operation in Addis Ababa, where our excellent ambassador, Susanna Moorehead, has forged a team that includes representatives of DFID, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Trade into one cohesive force. They certainly punch above their weight, and they are able to influence things as a result. I particularly note what my right hon. Friend said about Zimbabwe. There has never been a more important time for us to engage there. If we allow ourselves to be optimistic, there is the chance that Zimbabwe will emerge from the tragedy of recent decades.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Will my right hon. Friend also consider the influence that small missions can have? For example, in the past seven years we have opened embassies in Abidjan, Juba and Antananarivo. Although they have only one FCO-employed official and some locally employed staff, they deliver huge influence and are very warmly received by the host country. Surely we should do that more in Africa and the Pacific.

Richard Benyon: I could not agree more. I saw a similar one-post operation in Addis Ababa, where our excellent ambassador, Susanna Moorehead, has forged a team that includes representatives of DFID, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Trade into one cohesive force. They certainly punch above their weight, and they are able to influence things as a result. I particularly note what my right hon. Friend said about Zimbabwe. There has never been a more important time for us to engage there. If we allow ourselves to be optimistic, there is the chance that Zimbabwe will emerge from the tragedy of recent decades.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Developing my right hon. Friend’s theme, I too have experience of the outstanding work that defence attachés do in our NATO partner countries, such as the United States, and way beyond, in the Gulf and the far east. Their role extends further than military-to-military relationships; they also play a vital role in assisting commercial exploitation of defence capability and supporting British companies that seek to secure defence and security orders overseas.

Richard Benyon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The role of defence attachés in our defence manufacturing capability and our ability to market that important part of our economy is so important. I entirely support what he says.

France also has a truly impressive integrated soft power strategy. The opening of the Louvre museum in Abu Dhabi is a key indicator of that. Off the back of Government investment—not private investment, but cultural investment by the Government—flows influence that directly benefits France’s Exchequer. It is hard to compare like with like, but it is possible to argue that Germany spends about three times what we spend on its posts abroad. Even if we strip it down, it spends at least £4.6 billion, which is well over twice what we spend. We spend way more than Germany on development aid in Zambia, yet we employ about 11 people to deliver it, while Germany has around 150 people delivering its aid projects there. That is because we deliver our aid through a variety of organisations, including non-governmental organisations and international institutions such as the World Bank, whereas Germany uses a well-developed cadre of in-country experts in education, health, agriculture and other disciplines to implement its projects. At the end of the day, that means that German taxpayers get a better deal because German business is intrinsically linked to the soft power investment that its Government makes.

I am here not just to whinge, but to suggest a way forward. I want the Minister to reassure us. If he cannot, I want him to take on board the genuine concerns of people who have seen how our country operates abroad and believe that, impressive though that is, we need a dynamic shift in our ability to engage in the dangerous and highly competitive world in which we find ourselves. Can he assure us that every penny of official development assistance that can be used to develop a growing number of highly professional diplomats, defence attachés and other personnel is being used to maintain us as a relevant power in the coming decades? Can he convince me that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office understands Africa? Does he understand my concern, as someone who has travelled widely in Africa and was for some years our trade envoy in Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique, that our position as a favoured partner may be under threat?

In a few years’ time, a quarter of the world’s population will live in Africa. It is a continent of huge natural resources and has massive potential as a partner in
trade and so many other areas, but it feels like Britain risks being left behind. China’s investments abroad are not altruistic. In many ways, what it is doing is good—I have seen new roads, electricity generation projects and vast business parks, including in Ethiopia, that are changing people’s lives and providing wealth and opportunities for female empowerment, among other things—but it has a massive benefit to China, too. There can be a similar benefit to Britain if we play to our strengths on a continent where we are still admired and where such things as our language and our time zone are distinct advantages.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs was in Paris the other day. We had an interesting discussion about how Britain and France can co-operate in Africa. There are countries where the former colonial power is not well regarded. We have been able to play an important role in places where France is the former colonial power—Mali, the Sahel and so on—in return for exactly the same co-operation where we are the former colonial power. Now that we are leaving the European Union, I wonder whether we need to be wise about how we manage our relations with our European allies.

Richard Benyon: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. Our trade envoy, Lord Risby, is doing great work in countries such as Algeria in promoting what we do. I have not heard this from him, but I imagine that he is able to have conversations that the French perhaps find it harder to have. On defence engagement, we are using the Lancaster House agreement to our benefit. We are assisting the French forces in Mali with lift—helicopters and things like that. That partnership in the fight against terrorism—against organisations such as Boko Haram and al-Shabaab—delivers influence and benefit in a variety of ways.

My final point is that Ministers in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office require political intelligence.

Chris Bryant: Uh-oh. [Laughter.]

Richard Benyon: Perhaps I should have worded that better. They require intelligence about what is going on politically in those countries. They need to know who is on the rise in different parties, who the new influences are and who could be the next generation of leaders. Our diplomats provide that intelligence superbly, but Parliament should hold the Executive to account to ensure that we have enough of them and that we have them in the right places.

I argue that there should be a new strategy, even if we were not leaving the EU. However, Brexit brings a new urgency to our deliberations. It is not too late to see a paradigm shift in our strategy, but influence is hard won and easily lost. We need to understand that with influence comes jobs at home and stability abroad. That is something that even the Treasury should understand.

9.50 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) on putting the case forward so ably, as he always does when bringing issues to the House for consideration. Many in the Chamber are Brexiteers; some are not, but we are moving forward none the less. It is well known that I am a Brexiteer for many reasons, including so that we can be a sovereign democratic nation, decide what the rule of law is and how it should be interpreted, and set our own foreign and domestic policies to sow into our economy, instead of upholding those of other countries who have nothing but contempt for us and everything we stand for. When I was looking into the debate and getting background information about it, that is what my heart was saying, but that was not enough. We needed to know that we could survive outside Europe—the figures needed to be found and the numbers crunched. They determined that, yes, we could survive, but more than that, we could thrive as a nation in our own right once again by becoming the global Britain that we have heard so much about. How do we do that? That is why this debate is important.

The first step is to enhance the links we have now, taking the complete focus off Europe while firming up our trade partnerships there, and exploring other relationships outside that. We need the diplomatic service and resources to make that happen.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Is it not the case that if industries such as food and drink, which has a deep presence in my constituency, are to make the most of post-Brexit export market opportunities, we need more than ever a well-resourced diplomatic service with a genuinely global reach?

Jim Shannon: I agree. Each of us in the Chamber can speak for our own food and drink sectors, I am pleased to have Portavogie prawns and Comber potatoes in my constituency, both of which are names in their own right across Europe, and we want to see them across the whole of the world. We will build on that trade to make that happen. A number of new gin distilleries are also starting up: two have done so in my constituency in the last year and a half, and the hon. Lady probably has those as well. The sector is growing, and we want to ensure that that continues.

Chris Bryant: But according to the Prime Minister yesterday, the biggest threat we face at the moment relates to Russia. We have been proud that, over the past few years, we have managed to go to European Council meetings and get the rest of the European Union to sign up to international sanctions against Russia. At the moment, the Prime Minister is speaking to Macron and, no doubt, Merkel and other leaders around Europe to try to get the whole of Europe signed up to a common position. That will be vital to us. It will be much more difficult for us to achieve that when in future we will not get to sit at the table when common security and defence policy is agreed. How does the hon. Gentleman think that will happen?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his “but.” It is always good to have his input. Let us be honest: we all see the common threat, which at this time is Russia, as the Prime Minister told us yesterday in the Chamber. It is across the fronts of all the papers and front-page news on the media today. Already, France, Germany and other European partners recognise the common threat of Russia. I am confident, as I hope he
is, about how we can espy the common enemy, understand where the focus has to be and then move forward accordingly.

An oft-cited statistic on trade with the Commonwealth bears repeating: in 2015, UK exports of goods and services to the Commonwealth were worth some £47.4 billion, while imports were worth £45.5 billion. The right hon. Member for Newbury referred to the Commonwealth, and we cannot forget about it. It is important for us to have it in place.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that in all walks of life and every organisation, there comes a time when reinvigoration and renewals is needed, and the diplomatic service is no different from any other? If we are moving away from the European Union, we need to be at the top of our game and, as has been mentioned, have proper staff in place to take us forward into the next century.

Jim Shannon: Yes, we do need to invigorate. It is like a marriage: every now and again we need to invigorate it. It is important that we do so at this level, and that we do it well.

Those statistics on Commonwealth exports and imports give us a good idea. It is clear that great work is being done, but there is massive potential for more to be done. We are looking at how we can advance that. The UK’s trade is heavily focused on a small number of the 51 Commonwealth countries: in 2015, Australia, Canada, India, Singapore and South Africa accounted for 70% of UK exports to Commonwealth countries and 65% of imports from the Commonwealth. Those are massive figures, but we can build on that and do better.

How are trade links to be developed to deliver their full potential? A big key is through our Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Minister and the embassies. I know the Minister is committed to that at every level. Our teams in the embassies do a phenomenal job. I spoke recently in a debate highlighting the great work that the FCO did in bringing the body of one of my constituents home, and praise goes to the FCO for the marvellous work it does, but that case showed clearly that it could help so quickly and bring so much relief and peace to a grieving family because there was someone on the ground to sort it out. That was because we already have phenomenal staff in the embassies doing great work.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend has given one example from his constituency, but does he agree that we need to see more of what the diplomatic service does in many countries, which is work in alerting the United Kingdom Government of international security consequences and relief that can be offered in terms of Africa as well as the business of creating trade, which benefits both the recipient country and ourselves?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is right. The work that the embassies do cannot and does not happen when we are busy bringing people from our embassies into our EU embassies. We cannot afford to continue to have our focus split in such a way by robbing Peter to pay Paul. It is necessary to have trading partnerships in place in Europe, but it is also necessary to have representation globally, outside of Europe. That is where our focus should and must be as of now, and particularly as of 31 March 2019.

The FCO feels the same way, which is why it has sold off part of the family silver in the form of the Bangkok embassy. I understand that prime real estate can be sold to help make the changes needed to evolve the FCO while maintaining a presence, but my fear has been succinctly put in the words of a Guardian article, which cited a former Minister saying:

“Yes, we can sell the family silver for a bit and, yes, we punch above our weight, but unless we are careful, we are about to step into the ring with people way above our weight and without any gloves.”

We must be careful about what we do—that is the gist of that article. I want to take this opportunity to impress upon Government and the Minister how essential it is that funding is given to allow the FCO to do what we ask it to do: to establish a presence, build on that presence, and ensure that the links and support on the ground are there. The right hon. Member for Newbury put down a clear marker for that in his introduction.

To take this matter to a constituency level—everything relates to back home in our constituencies—I am currently working with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs team and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to attempt to circumnavigate the mounds of red tape that exist between differing nations such as China and ourselves.

A business in my constituency is ready with a product and raring to go in China, yet it is being held up by the wording on a veterinary certificate. It is immensely frustrating to see how people can introduce words to become obstacles to moving forward. We have been negotiating and working on this—I praise that Minister, who is going through the same frustration—and it is clear that in such situations our Departments need the help and guidance of the FCO.

In achieving for constituents and businesses in the UK, we achieve for ourselves. When a business in Ards thrives and takes on more staff, my local economy thrives. Because of the nature of tax, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs also thrives, and therefore on the national level we thrive as well. To do that we need staff on the ground in those countries to help departments, and we cannot have them all sent off to shore up embassies in Europe. We must send those staff where we will need them in the future. We must be able to work both inside and outside Europe, and to do that we must have the finance and staff in place. That is where we are at present.

The point of this motion, at least for me, and most certainly my take on it, is that for us to succeed globally we must be present and effective globally. That will not happen if we scale back globally to focus on Europe alone. Hopefully the Minister will confirm that we are branching out and developing our embassies across the world, taking up global opportunities and doing all the things referred to by my hon. Friend and colleague the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell). We should be helping people in other countries, but also trying to advance our export and import trade.

I understand that the Department is in a difficult position, but we need to play the long game, which I do not believe means pulling back in other nations. We must...
keep the gloves on and be prepared to fight for our global position, and not allow Europe to seem to be the be-all and end-all of our future aims and strategies—that is why we voted to leave the European Union. Let me be clear: I must not be misunderstood as saying that we should pull out of Europe—certainly not. Trade with Europe is important for our future, but so is global trade and we must find a way of doing both and doing them well. That will mean recruiting more and spending more now, as well as in the long term, and receiving more for all our benefits. I implore the Minister: sell no more family silver, and instead focus on polishing what we have and putting it to the best use possible.

10.1 am

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) on his excellent speech in opening this important and serious debate. I will not respond to what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—he is also my friend—said, other than to remind him of famous lines written in worse days: “To hell with the future and God bless the past, and may God in his mercy look down on Belfast.” I think that to characterise the situation with the European Union in the way that he did is not sensible or helpful to his constituents.

I will commence my remarks by paying tribute to the Foreign Office and all those who work there. What it now achieves on its very, very limited budget is exceptional. Generally speaking, the standard of our people and our representation abroad is astonishingly good, as my right hon. Friend made clear. I hope the House will acknowledge that, and thank those staff and praise them for their efforts.

I strongly endorse the words of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) and for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) about military attachés. When I was Minister of State for the Armed Forces I used to interview every military attaché personally, because I believe it is a significant and important position within an embassy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow said, military attachés are part of the golden currency and their role is far wider than just the military. In places such as the Gulf, Saudi Arabia, and particularly in the middle east where the golden currency is relationships, those military attachés play a vital role that should be seen—as indeed it is—not as a sort of job at the end of a distinguished career, but as a job for someone very much on the way up. It is an important part of our diplomatic effort.

It seems yet another act of self-inflicted British mutilation that, at a time when the risks and problems abroad are ever increasing, and when through a very poor decision this country has decided to leave the European Union and make our way in a complex and difficult world alone, we should so ill resource our Foreign Office. We must put that right immediately. Contrary to what most of the tabloid press believe, this country is not a superpower, and it is inevitable that our influence—already sadly but quite clearly on the wane—will further decrease as the realities of the folly of our exit from the European Union become clear. A middle-ranking power, for that is what we are, must work very hard indeed to protect and further its interests. It must burnish and sustain its alliances, networks and friendships to keep them in good working order, and above all in good repair, ready for the day when we need them for the big stuff. Such a day is today, and the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister, and all those concerned will be doing all they can to bring our allies and friends alongside us in the very difficult task that we have over the next 24 hours when dealing with the Russians.

Sir Hugo Swire: To continue that theme, if we are to have any credibility, and ultimately if we are to maintain our seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is it not ever more important to stamp what the United Kingdom stands for around the world, and redouble our commitment to NATO and other organisations?

Sir Nicholas Soames: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. He was a distinguished and successful Foreign Office Minister, and he has seen all these things in action. He is completely right: we will have to redouble all our efforts, call in all our chips, and work very hard to retain our influence and position on the world stage. That is an incontestable fact.

Chris Bryant: Some people have suggested in recent months that after Brexit, instead of spending so much time on Brussels, we should spend more time on other European capitals. My feeling is exactly the opposite: to secure the foreign policy and security outcomes we want, will we not have to double our efforts in Brussels to ensure that we win arguments?

Sir Nicholas Soames: I agree, and I would say further that we will have to ride every single horse in the park, not just the European horse. We no longer have a diplomatic network in the way that we used to, because our diplomatic network has been subordinated, in a perfectly sensible way, to working within the European Union. We will have to revitalise that, and indeed there is now a great rush to hire people or move them around, to ensure that the embassies are properly equipped. My father was for a time the British Ambassador in Paris. I was in the Army at that time, and I look back on those days, before we were members of the European Union, at the sheer scale of British diplomatic efforts to achieve what we set out to achieve, which was truly remarkable. We will have to replicate that right across Europe in order to retain our position.

Chris Bryant: I will continue if I may.

These relationships with allies, friends and networks do not just drop into our lap; they require continuous and ceaseless effort, and the most serious diplomatic work. Take the example of the last few months. With our allies we continue to be engaged in an active diplomatic and other campaign to counter Islamist extremism. We have also once again entered an era of deterrence in the face of threatening rhetoric and aggressive behaviour from Russia. While military deterrence must be properly integrated with political, economic, diplomatic and other hybrid deterrence measures, credible conventional military capability remains a vital part of a strategy designed to keep the peace. It also ranks, pari passu, with the diplomatic effort required to ensure the same thing. In an environment of uncertainty, it is essential that we stand with all our diplomatic, military and other assets,
ready to reassure, and if necessary defend, our allies in a manner that will force any potential opponents to think twice. As I have said, that requires not just military assets, but most especially our diplomatic reach across the world.

Jim Shannon: On the news this morning one suggestion made by one of the experts in response to Russia’s actions was that we should withdraw from the World Cup in Russia, and instead hold it here in England. Does the right hon. Gentleman feel that that would be an impressive way of putting pressure on Russia to bring about change? It is perhaps a diplomatic way—well, it might be an undiplomatic way of doing it, but it is an important way.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I do not think that it is nearly serious enough for the kind of steps that the Government will need to take against Russia. Just to say a lot of dignitaries will not be sent to the World cup is nowhere near good enough. It is a pathetic response. We will need to do much better and be much tougher, so that it is understood across the full spectrum that the behaviour in question is something up with which we will not put.

It is not just a question of money, although that is vital, of course. It is also a question—and my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury has already enlarged on, and mention how extraordinarily impressed I was by our diplomatic mission in Harare—our excellent ambassador and her wonderful staff—and by the DFID staff, who are excellent. They are working together and acting as a force multiplier for the United Kingdom and for our objectives in Zimbabwe. We could not have been so successful in Zimbabwe with that extraordinary aid programme, which is brilliant, without everyone working together. It is a model for the rest of the diplomatic service. There are still places, in the lands of the ungodly, where that does not happen. It is unthinkable, to my mind, that the Foreign Secretary does not issue a fatwa to the effect that it will happen everywhere—and that right soon. It is a ridiculous waste of money and assets for the two to be accommodated separately. They should be accommodated together and work together for British interests.

I cannot believe that my right hon. Friend the Minister believes that it is sensible even to consider closing more diplomatic posts. Indeed, we must now be pretty much at the bare minimum of our representation. We need adequately to staff the smaller posts, so that we do not just have an ambassador and a locally engaged driver. It is all very well having locally engaged staff. They are marvellous and do a good job, and they are very loyal; but they are not, at the end of the day, Brits. We are after promoting our British way of life and our values. I again endorse the point that we must return constantly to making sure that people understand the values of this country as we make our sad way from the European Union. It is right that we re-establish our values as they are. That requires a good, decent diplomatic story.

I also reaffirm my unstinting support and admiration for the BBC World Service and congratulate everyone who works in that extraordinary organisation on the excellent job they do for this country. It would be a foolish short-term measure to reduce in any way the financial support to the BBC World Service, and I look to the Government to give me an assurance that that will not be the case. I endorse the views of the provost, or rather Lord Waldegrave—he is the provost of the school that my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury went to—about the winner of the battle between the two great Departments of state, with respect to the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence. I always used to say—I hasten to say it was as a joke, because I actually got a letter from the Foreign Office stating that it did not work for the Russians—that the Treasury works for the Russians, given how successfully it has undermined our military effort. I wholly support my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence in the energetic and earnest campaign that he is rightly waging to increase our military spending to about 2.5% as a bare minimum.

Sir Henry Bellingham: My right hon. Friend has mentioned the BBC World Service. Does he agree that in many of the countries that he mentioned, where we need to have one family in one location, the role of the British Council is also extremely important and is a crucial way of building up our soft power, as is the role of the BBC World Service?

Sir Nicholas Soames: My hon. Friend has always been known for his natural exuberance. If he would pause for a second, he would hear the magisterial exposition that I am about to give of the British Council. Another balls-up by Bellingham.

To pre-empt my hon. Friend’s over-excitement, we have a priceless asset in the British Council. I again urge the Foreign Office to accept its vital importance. It is important that it should work extremely closely with the Foreign Office and in the general promotion of the British aim, and that the Government should continue to fund it, recognising the exceptional results that it achieves for Great Britain. I try always, when I am lucky enough to travel abroad, to call on the British Council. I cannot tell you, Mr Bailey, how much I admire the remarkable work done, in place after place where I have been, by the people who work for the British Council. It is extraordinary. They build profound relationships with people—for example, through the learning of English, which hopefully equips people to come here and study. It is part of a greater British effort, and important for that.

There is a compelling—indeed, unassailable—case for Britain to retain and develop its active diplomacy, which means it must be better resourced, and to provide
the money needed to do the job properly. We are all struggling to retain a rules-based world, which is clearly in our best interests and which we have always promoted. We have, over the years, been its architect and great supporter, with our American allies and others. It is today a concept under considerable threat. Our country is truly at a crossroads. Our global influence is already coming under considerable pressure and it is essential for the further success, safety and security of this realm that our diplomacy is properly resourced, so that it can do the very good job that it currently does on a shoestring.

10.17 am

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Thank you, Mr Bailey, for getting round to this knight, as Sir Lancelot may have said to Guinevere. I am delighted to join in this important debate this morning. I hope that it will not be the last we shall have on the subject.

I do not seek to replicate much of what my right hon. and hon. Friends have said. I just want to pick up on one or two issues, the first of which is our physical global imprint—our estate. I hope to go from here later to a lunch to congratulate James Stourton and Luke White, who have produced a magnificent book called “British Embassies: Their Diplomatic and Architectural History”. It is an extraordinarily good book on Britain’s overseas estate. Looking through it, it is possible to have one of two reactions—to giggle in bemused embarrassment at the awful post-colonial life that our embassies represent, or feel rather proud that we possess some of the finest properties, many of which, incidentally, were gifted to us by the then Heads of State of the host countries. That is something that other countries look on with envy.

In my four and a half years at the Foreign Office, I was pleased to open some rather small embassies that had been closed, in Asunción and in El Salvador, and a consulate in Recife, and so on. It was always a source of pride to be reopening embassies, however small, rather than going around closing them. I cannot think of a pleasant example, in retrospect, about which we can say, “Gosh, weren’t we clever to sell X embassy: we are in much better accommodation now”—Madrid being one of the great disasters. I was rather involved in the Bangkok embassy site; the rationale for the sale was that it was inappropriately located and no longer fit for purpose, although, needless to say, we had just spent some huge amount of money on accommodation on that site. I note with horror what I have picked up on my various visits—that the Chancellery building in Paris, which will be well known to my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), whose bedroom no doubt overlooked it for many happy years, is possibly going to be sold. What a ridiculous message it would send to Paris, at the heart of Europe, as we exit the European Union, to sell our Chancellery building on the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré.

My right hon. Friend the Minister does an excellent job in the Foreign Office now. I do not know whether he sits on the body I sat on—the Foreign Office board, where many of these things are discussed. It strikes me, in my experience, that these things are never brought to the attention of Ministers. Perhaps they are brought to the Foreign Secretary, but on the whole they are decided by the permanent under-secretary and others—the mandarins within the Foreign Office. There is absolutely no doubt, to my way of thinking, that these are Treasury-led decisions. It is about saving money, not about looking at our global footprint and where we want to be represented.

In future, whenever there is any discussion, there is an oversight role here for the Foreign Affairs Committee, on which many hon. Members sit, to have a view on any proposed changes to the diplomatic estate globally, and not at the eleventh hour, when the decisions have effectively already been taken. I would like to see that change, and I would welcome the Minister’s view on that.

Chris Bryant rose—

Richard Benyon rose—

Sir Hugo Swire: I will take the hon. Gentleman’s intervention first, and then that of my right hon. Friend.

Chris Bryant: The Foreign Affairs Committee intends to do exactly as the right hon. Gentleman suggests. If I can correct one thing, I do not think the Madrid decision was made on a Treasury basis. The old building was difficult to maintain and was listed under Spanish law and all the rest of it, but we did move to the wrong place. I opened it, as it happened—the highest embassy we have in the world, I think, because it is in the highest capital in Europe and on the 75th floor, or whatever. It is virtually inaccessible to lots of people and it was a terrible mistake for us to move there. My biggest concern—

Mr Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be short and not speeches. I want to bring the Front-Bench spokespersons in at 10.30, so would everybody bear that in mind?

Sir Hugo Swire: I will take a brief intervention from my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury.

Richard Benyon: I was in Panama just after we sold one of the few nice buildings in Panama City, on the main corniche, and moved the embassy residence to the suburbs. The ambassador said to me, almost with tears in his eyes, that he could have made a business case for the use of that building that would have allowed us to continue there. Does my right hon. Friend agree that such decisions are often taken with a short-term perspective, which results in a failure to understand not only the long-term business case, but the influence case?

Sir Hugo Swire: My right hon. Friend is clearly right. I see that on 21 February, in a topical question, I asked that there be a moratorium on any asset disposals until such a review is complete. That question was answered with tremendous agreement by the Foreign Secretary. Let us have a moratorium until we decide what our global footprint will be, and let us have no more selling off of properties until the Foreign Affairs Committee has some formal oversight role.

Another thing I campaigned for, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex touched on briefly has some formal oversight role.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Another thing I campaigned for, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex touched on briefly in describing his experiences in Zimbabwe, is what I called “one HMG”. I should be interested to hear an update from the Minister on that. Over the years, many different Government Departments have crept into some of these places and have other organisations in many capitals around the world; they include the Scotland
Office, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department of Energy and Climate Change. Often, the ambassador does not have much control over some of these other organisations.

In some countries—I think Nepal was one—the head of the Department for International Development was a much more senior figure than our ambassador and would not kowtow to them. It is my view that, very simply, the individual who represents the British Government abroad is the ambassador, and everybody should work for the ambassador. There should be no discrepancy in employment, accommodation and so on, and where possible, all those other agencies should be brought under the British embassy or the British high commission and co-located on that estate.

That leads me to my next point: we are still shadow-boxing about the independence of DFID. Increasingly, as a lot of the Foreign Office is funded by overseas development money, that skews things and the lines are getting blurred. I wish at some point someone would have the bravery to say that DFID belongs back with the mother ship. We could have huge economies and savings, and greater alignment of British views and values overseas, by bringing it back to the mother ship. To anyone who says, “We can’t do that; all the non-governmental organisations will get too upset,” I say that I do not think the NGOs are in any position to do anything at the moment—at least some of them—and the stock rejoinder to them is, “Look, we stand by our pledge of 0.07% of GDP. That’s our answer. How we actually apply that is up to the Government, not the NGOs.”

We are about to see a major change to the European External Action Service, the force under Federica Mogherini. I always thought it to be pretty hit and miss around the world; it seemed to me very often that the head of the EEAS was always going off to the British embassy to find out the latest intelligence, but we paid a lot of money to the EEAS and a lot of our best people were employed there, on better terms than our own people locally. That is something we want to withdraw; I would be interested to hear the Minister’s views on how many British people who currently work for the EEAS will be pulled back into the FCO and where they will be deployed.

Overall, it seems to me that a major piece of work needs to be done—a major realignment of what the UK is seeking to do abroad. That involves the World Service, the British Council and different Departments of State; it involves redefining what we mean by soft power as a sufficient military capability. It is pointless to have soft power unless we have decent armed forces which, if necessary, can support that soft power. That is a fundamental piece of work that needs to be done, and I am not convinced that it is being done cross-departmentally or that it is being done by Ministers. I believe a Cabinet Sub-Committee should be set up without further ado to bring together all these competing demands on the Exchequer, to articulate what we expect from our superb diplomatic service—the envy of the world—to ensure that it is given the tools to do the job, and to better co-ordinate all the different parts of the state to that end.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) on securing this debate. It is one that I seem to find myself in more and more often; I am sure the Minister is thinking, “Oh, not Docherty-Hughes again,” but I am also delighted to see the Minister in their place.

There seems to be a consistent narrative, when we debate the diplomatic service and resources, of concerns about investment from across the entire House. The right hon. Member was right that it is not just a numbers game. It is not just about numbers; they are not everything. Many of the right hon. and hon. Members here, who are far more learned and knowledgeable on these matters than I, will recognise that connectedness and relationships can also be critical in diplomacy and are equally important.

I have just returned from Washington DC with the Defence Committee, where I saw the work of the French diplomatic corps regarding some of the activities on Capitol Hill. Being a member of the European Union has not stopped them covering Capitol Hill like a rash and speaking vocally on behalf of the French Government. That is something that we have clearly forgotten about here in the UK. That is in the practical sense of their own diplomatic activity, but it is also about a recognition of how modern states engage; it is not just about the past, but about modern relationships under the international rule of law.

Clarity is also needed about how we strengthen our diplomatic networks without undermining further the institutional integrity and, importantly, the institutional memory of the FCO. While investment to create what I am led to believe will be 150 jobs to deal with the complexity of Brexit is welcome, we should have clarity that those new jobs do not undermine the capabilities of the FCO’s teams across Asia, Africa and even both of the Americas.

From my perspective, there are clear issues that the Government must consider in moving forward. First, we should recognise the relationships with our closest allies that support and enhance the rule of international law, which is critical if we are to move forward. Secondly, we should utilise diplomacy to enhance economic stability and discourage mercantilism, which undermines liberal democracy. Third—the Minister will no doubt know where I am going with this—we need to recognise the challenges that UK citizens face abroad if, for instance, they are arrested or held without charge. Many nations already have legislative frameworks under which their own diplomatic corps deal with this, but we do not. Consular support would offer clarity to our FCO teams, the families and Members. The Minister probably no doubt knows the example of my constituent, Jagtar Singh Johal, who continues to be held in India.

Fourthly, we should work with devolved Governments across the UK. For example, existing frameworks, such as the Scottish Government’s international framework, could be a useful tool in building those relationships we have in specific locations. We should recognise opportunities to strengthen the devolved Administrations’ offer, such as the work being undertaken by the Scottish Government with the Arctic Council and some of the Nordic states on the high north, where some would say we have key gaps, and also their hubs in Berlin and Paris. As I said
to the Prime Minister yesterday after her statement, we should also challenge some of our closest allies, such as Spain—a NATO member—which allows the refuelling and supply of the Russian fleet. Those are the kind of diplomacy implements that we should take forward.

We should also recognise that, with reduced resources, relationships are critical. In Washington DC, I noticed representatives of another European Union country—one with a population of 3 million—covering Capitol Hill in the most extraordinary way, but without a huge embassy to go with it: Ireland. Its diaspora is so interconnected that it could teach us a thing or two.

I have been consistent on how we should deal with Russia. When I turned on Radio Scotland this morning, I have to admit that I thought that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) had suddenly become a Member for a Scottish constituency. However, I did not disagree with the majority of what they had to say. The challenges are clear, and they need to be rebuffed in a coherent and cohesive manner with our allies.

How are we supposed to cover the economic challenges that China poses while wanting to cover all the other bases? The right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) wanted us to ride all those horses. Given that we are leaving the European Union, how will we meet that challenge? I understand where they were coming from: it is about how we use our economic challenge to ride the horses such as China, the political, military, economic challenges of Russia and some of the most extraordinary challenges coming out of the United States.

There are great links to be had in the Commonwealth, but there are also huge challenges in how we diplomatically face down challenges to the international rule of law, such as human rights for women, Christians and Muslims—people of all faiths—and the LGBTI community. How do we do that during the complexity of leaving the European Union? Having voted to remain myself, I was incredibly stressed. I asked him what the matter was, and he said that his servants were on strike and he had been trying to sort it out.

I hope that the Foreign Office has moved on since 1990 in that respect, because it is extremely important that Foreign Office officials project Britain as we are now. I could not agree more with the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) on Britain's place in the world today. We are a middle-sized nation, not a superpower, and it is extremely important that we behave intelligently and appropriately. Fantasising about what we were and where we have been is distinctly unhelpful.

He was also absolutely right that, in order to maximise our power and influence at the moment, we need to build relationships, whether with EU colleagues, in the United Nations or in NATO. We will never achieve anything except by collaborating with other countries.

Sir Nicholas Soames: The hon. Lady is making an impressive speech, but may I disagree with her on one tiny point? Although it is important that we do not think that we are what we were, we do have this absolutely wonderful architecture and a brilliant inheritance of vast experience all over the world, in good times and bad times. Our values and everything we stand for are built on rock-firm footings. It is now our job to see that that legacy is expressed in contemporary terms, which requires a much more aggressive approach.

Helen Goodman: I will come to the soft power aspects and the institutions that contribute to that in a moment. First, I want to look at the numbers and the reductions that the Foreign Office budget has had since 2010 and is projected to have.

Chris Bryant: I slightly disagree with the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames). I do not know whether my hon. Friend noticed, but Emmanuel Macron went to India the other day and said, notwithstanding our historic relationship with India, as part of the former empire and all the rest of it, that he intends France to be India’s prime access point to the European Union in the future. We have to be very careful about not relying on the past.

Helen Goodman: If we leave the European Union, we obviously cannot be the prime access point to the European Union. That stands to reason.

I will come to the soft power assets in a moment, but I just want to say something about the numbers. The Foreign Office budget reduction is slightly unclear. Is it 16%, 30% or 40% over the 10-year period? Whatever it
is, it is quite a significant amount of resource. I realise that some of the Foreign Office budget has gone into the Department for International Trade and some into the Department for Exiting the European Union, but the smallest cut that one can glean from looking at the numbers is about 16%, which is none the less extremely large. It seems to me that it is difficult for the Government to project the global Britain role while at the same time reducing resources in the Foreign Office.

Turning to our soft power assets, we are all very proud of the World Service and pleased with the British Council, and we all think that the Commonwealth is a fantastic network. There is another soft power asset, which I think we should look at alongside those assets. I am talking about our universities and higher education. We have soft power assets in this country as well as overseas.

Sir Hugo Swire: Will the hon. Lady take this opportunity to applaud the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for the Chevening scholarship programme and the Commonwealth programme? These are hugely important ways of promoting the United Kingdom domestically to an international audience.

Helen Goodman: Yes, and of course the English language is the root of much of this.

However, I disagree with what was said previously in this debate about overseas aid. The Labour Government set up the Department for International Development as a separate Department in order that we could be absolutely clear that the aid budget had aid objectives—sustainable development objectives—and we have now agreed, on a cross-party basis, on the 0.7% target. We believe that aid has been much more effective and much better because it has not been jumbled up with other policy objectives. In my opinion, the foreign policy benefits from a good aid programme are greater than can be achieved when people try to go along to the Development Assistance Committee and fiddle with the rules, saying, “Oh, couldn’t we please put the hurricane money for the Caribbean into the overseas aid programme?” No. The reason why we get credibility and support from those countries that are receiving our aid is the very high quality of the aid, so I would certainly not wish to pull those two things together again.

One thing that is not very clear in the Foreign Office annual report and accounts is how the money is spent. In particular, it is not clear how the conflict, stability and security fund, which is the share of the budget going from the aid Department to the Foreign Office, is spent. I think the Government should be extremely cautious about merging those two.

I also think we need to put a question mark over the switch from Africa, Latin America and Asia to the European Union. Perhaps the Foreign Office simply does not have enough resource, in which case Foreign Office Ministers need to go back to their colleagues in the Treasury and make the case, but it seems to Opposition Members that if we want to develop our relationships across the globe, we cannot be cutting our resource in those other parts of the world. I submit that the switch of 50 people to the European Union will probably be quite a short-sighted change.

The question is really whether global Britain is a slogan or a policy. As the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs said, there is a risk that it is becoming a slogan rather than a policy. If Ministers need to bid for more money, so be it. We do not see holding to the current limit as necessarily a hard line. We should be investing in our relationships across the globe.

10.45 am

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) for securing this vital debate on an issue of national importance. I pay tribute to his valuable work on the Intelligence and Security Committee. I know from experience the time-consuming but absorbing nature of its activity, albeit that, by its nature, it is rather unsung and, in theory at least, low profile.

I thank everyone who contributed during the debate; there were some excellent contributions. I shall endeavour to answer all the questions, as I have a little more time than I had anticipated. There are one or two more technical aspects on which I will write to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), if I am able to do so, subsequently.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury rightly talked about the need for a dramatic and dynamic shift of resource. He touched on our Africa strategy. As he will be aware, our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out, at her first G20 meeting in July 2017, a new long-term vision for our partnerships with Africa, centred on supporting African aspirations for economic growth, trade, job creation and investment. Ministers across Her Majesty’s Government have worked closely together to refresh our approach in order to deliver on that vision. We are clear—I reiterate the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury—that our substantial development spend in Africa needs to be directed more broadly towards the UK national interest, as well as supporting those in greatest need in Africa.

Let me touch on the point raised just now by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland. I agree with her fundamentally, in that I think it is dangerous for us to look on aid as intermingled with other strands of British interest. We can take, for example, the deteriorating political situation in Cambodia at the moment. We have some important long-term aid programmes in Cambodia that deal with mine clearance and are designed to work for the most vulnerable in that country. The notion that we should hold the Cambodian Government of the day, however much we might disapprove of their work, to ransom in some form in that regard would be quite wrong. Indeed, I made it very clear in my meeting with the Cambodian ambassador only a few weeks ago that we would continue, on exactly the same terms, to fulfil our aid obligations.

However, I do believe that there is at least some mileage in the view that we need to look at this issue. I have sympathy with a number of my right hon. Friends, who talked in their contributions about the idea of DFID coming back into the Foreign Office. There is a sense in which there needs to be a broader focus. Particularly in the post-Brexit world that we will be living in, we need to focus all our energies in a one-Government situation.
My right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury talked about official development assistance, which was also raised by the Opposition spokesman. It is right to say that the Foreign Office is and will continue to be a large ODA-spending Department. The Department closely complements DFID’s efforts, and we are trying to deliver on the Government’s aid strategy commitments through our own programmes—in particular, the cross-Whitehall conflict, stability and security fund and the prosperity fund, for which I now have responsibility in the Foreign Office. That also involves grants to external organisations, and our global remit means that we are designing those to deliver a breadth of programming in support of our national security strategy that other Departments simply do not have the resource to do. I believe that programmes of that sort will very evidently begin to add value by responding quickly to specific or niche requirements in volatile environments. I am talking about pursuing higher-risk programmes where political sensitivities require a different approach, but also exploring and testing options before scaling up and unlocking larger interventions by others.

It is recognised that some of the ODA and non-ODA programmes will have to be blended together, in order to secure some of the best outcomes in the future. That applies not just to Africa, but to Asia and the Pacific—an issue close to my heart and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire). I accept that an unintended consequence will be that some aspects of our annual report will be rendered more opaque.

In many ways it would be a pleasure to have a much broader debate, along the lines that my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) developed. I hope that we will be able to have further discussions both offline and on the Floor of the House in future. He is well aware that I have a significant amount of sympathy with much of what he said. We need to be realistic about where we are in the future. I will be honest; I gave considerable thought to whether I should be a Minister in this Government. I was, like him, passionately—on emotional and geopolitical grounds as much as anything else—keen that this country should stay in the European Union. Yes, in my heart of hearts, I do believe it was a mistake. However, we have to make it work. I think it is also important that people of my mind play their part within Government, rather than just beyond Government, not to frustrate that Brexit outcome, but to try and make it work as well as we can and to put that voice across.

Chris Bryant: I do not disagree with what the Minister has just said, but the key thing is how we ensure that we are able to secure the policy outcomes on defence, security and foreign affairs, in relation to places such as Russia, the middle east or Iran, after Brexit. I urge the Foreign Office to do a full review of our presence in Brussels itself, because it will need to become much more like a lobbying operation than it has ever been before.

Mark Field: I have a lot of sympathy with that view and I think there is little doubt that we will need to do that. I saw that when I attended the Foreign Affairs Council only last week, in the stead of the Foreign Secretary.

I will talk a bit about the British Council, because that was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex. I fully recognise the fantastic work of the British Council and its soft power potential post-Brexit. I have seen that with my own eyes in virtually all my overseas visits in Asia, and indeed even last week when I was in Paris. Funding for the British Council has increased over the spending period. There are issues, as I think my right hon. Friend is aware, about the signing off of accounts. We need to get those accounts ready, not just to impress the Treasury, but because I want to be able to make the most aggressive case for the importance of that soft power, and the British Council’s integral importance in that, when we leave the European Union, but that does require the British Council having its financial house in order. We are working closely with the Treasury to try to achieve that impact.

Sir Nicholas Soames rose—

Mark Field: If I may, I will make some progress, as I am now running out of time, having tried to address a number of the issues.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon made strong points about the issues around estates. We have discussed this in the past, but I have to say that I think all of us regret the idea that the embassy building in Bangkok had to be sold off. One rather hopes that having lost Bangkok, it will be the last of such sales. As he is well aware, a considerable amount of that money is being reinvested in improving our estates across the world. I have to say, I have not heard in any way the issue he raised about the Paris Chancellery. As for the EEAS people being sent back by the FCO, I will try and write to him in some detail on that.

I believe that a well-directed, properly funded diplomatic service is vital to delivering the United Kingdom’s overseas objectives at such a crucial time. The world today is more complex, challenging and costly than at any point since the end of the cold war. At the same time, we are striving to deliver a positive, hopeful, optimistic and, I still hope, a successful exit from the EU, while simultaneously turning our vision of global Britain into reality by increasing further our already significant international reach and influence. It is no underestimate, however, to say today that the UK faces—I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex—its greatest diplomatic challenges in decades.

This Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that the diplomatic service receives the resources it needs to support a resilient and adaptable network, with sufficient capacity to respond decisively to fresh priorities and challenges. This includes exploiting the inevitable opportunities that will arise in a post-Brexit world.

We have some 274 posts in 169 different countries and territories. The FCO’s current overseas network provides a crucial platform from which the 30 other Government Departments and agencies are able to operate. Our diplomats cultivate the deep and nuanced relationships that a number of right hon. and hon. Members have referred to, which provide critical political insight and access. This helps deliver all other aspects of Government policy around the globe. The diplomatic service must remain crucial to delivering the wide range of Government priority work, from counter-terrorism to cultural engagement, and from consular assistance to trade. I have a lot of sympathy with the direct point
that was made about the importance of our ambassador or high commissioner being the leading light, irrespective of all the other aspects of the one platform set-up.

Historically, it has been impossible to deliver this at comparatively little investment. As right hon. and hon. Members will be aware, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s budget this financial year is only £1.2 billion, which represents just 6% of the Government’s expenditure on a major overseas Department. Once cross-Whitehall funds and non-discretionary spending, such as UN subscriptions, are removed, the remaining FCO budget is about £860 million. Delivering diplomacy at a relatively reduced slice of public expenditure in recent years has also been made partially possible through our membership of the European Union. Within the EU we have been able, hitherto, to amplify our voice in a range of international institutions. By leveraging the European Union we have been able to gain influence in countries where we have had a limited presence, such as francophone countries in west Africa. However, as our relationship beyond the European Union evolves, we must all accept that resourcing of the diplomatic service will also need to evolve to ensure that Britain’s voice and influence is not diminished.

I have responsibility for the FCO’s economic diplomacy and I recognise that sector-wide specialism in areas such as technology—whether FinTech or cybersecurity—international energy strategy, pharmaceuticals, and climate change and green finance will enable us to maximise our global impact. This will require not just bilateral co-operation, but a redoubling of our multilateral relationships, whether with the UN, the OECD or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, to name just a few.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: If I may, I will make progress, because I am running out of time and I really do want to cover all the points.

Needless to say, when it comes to free trade agreements, the single most important deal that the UK shall strike in the years ahead is the one we are able to agree with the EU27. More investment in the diplomatic service is essential, so that it is able to deal with the increasingly complex challenges it faces, so I am pleased that this important task has already begun. Last September, the FCO received almost £6.5 million from the Treasury to help deliver its EU exit priority work. These funds were used to create over 150 new positions across London and the Europe network. I take on board the point raised by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) about the importance of Brussels in that whole set-up. These diplomats are looking to work hard to deliver a new sanctions framework to transition the most crucial third-party agreements, to mitigate the risks of our EU exit for our overseas territories, for example, and to deepen bilateral relationships.

We recognise, however, that other countries are also investing heavily in their overseas networks, as my right hon. Friends have rightly observed. Germany is increasing its budget for its ministry for Foreign Affairs by a third, to some €5.2 billion over a three-year period. The French, the Dutch and the Turks are all investing substantially. Needless to say, in Asia, a part of the world for which I have responsibility, China, India and Japan are all doing likewise. If we are to maintain and increase our global outreach and influence, we need to ensure that the vision of a global Britain is more than just a mantra. I accept that for this, we must ensure that we provide the investment that is required. The FCO will evidently require reinforcements in Asia and the Pacific if the UK’s global and security goals are to be properly achieved.

I have been heartened by the reaction of my ministerial colleagues across Government, as they have been alive to that need, but the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will continue to work closely with the Treasury to ensure that the diplomatic service is sufficiently resourced, not simply to deliver EU exit and global Britain, but to ensure that they are a success.

I will conclude, as I know my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury wants to speak briefly. I agree that if the UK is to continue to thrive and not simply survive, it is essential that we address the resource pressures of our diplomatic service. If we are to deal with the challenges and opportunities of the EU exit, I accept that we now need to consider where further investment is needed. I am pleased that we are debating this issue today. I hope that we will continue to debate it. I look forward to working closely with all of my colleagues here, who have this issue so passionately in their heart. Finally, the Government are committed to enabling Britain to have the diplomatic service it needs, as we work to realise our vision of a truly global Britain.

10.59 am

Richard Benyon: I am grateful to the Minister for coming here and giving such an honest and frank assessment. It was very impressive to hear. I hope he can convey a message back that many of us are looking, over the next few months, for a major setting out of a new strategy for these extraordinary times in which we live. That is going to require looking across the many issues that we have discussed. I am grateful for his reply to us today.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Pneumoconiosis: Support for Former Miners

11 am

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for former miners with pneumoconiosis.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank the Minister for being here to respond to the debate and colleagues for their attendance.

It is a privilege to have secured my first Westminster Hall debate on a subject of interest to many of my constituents and many in former coalmining communities across the UK. Mansfield has a proud coalmining history, which ended very recently—just a few years ago—when the nearby Thoresby colliery closed. For decades, the community was built around the industry, and we still feel many of its effects.

I applied for this debate because, although coalminers’ pneumoconiosis is not a terribly widely known illness, it is prevalent within mining communities and should receive greater attention. I have been contacted by a number of constituents and unions about this issue, which I am keen to raise directly with Ministers. I am asking the Department for Work and Pensions to work with the Department of Health and Social Care to review the diagnostic tools that are used to assess miners for signs of pneumoconiosis.

Coalminers’ pneumoconiosis is an occupational lung disease caused by the inhalation of dust from coalmines. It is often known as “black lung” and it causes thousands of death each year worldwide. Inhaled coal dust progressively builds up in the lungs over long periods, leading to inflammation of the lungs, fibrosis and even necrosis. The most common symptoms of pneumoconiosis are coughing and shortness of breath. The risk is generally higher when people have been exposed to mineral dust in high concentrations and if they have been exposed to coal dust for long periods.

Coughing and shortness of breath can, of course, be symptoms of a wide range of illnesses, which is partly why pneumoconiosis is often overlooked by health professionals and others. Even when a former miner presents to their GP with those symptoms, it is not always picked up straightaway. Most miners would recognise that a cough is inherent—part of the territory of working in those conditions—and many would not consider it a symptom of anything more than their career underground. Many therefore do not come forward early enough, and this is where the problem lies. We need to do more to encourage this conversation.

Many former miners who present with such symptoms are simply referred as out-patients to their local hospitals for standard chest X-rays. They will have had these X-rays regularly throughout their time in the industry and most will have been told that they have a clean bill of health on that basis. The trouble is that traditional two-dimensional X-ray films often do not show enough detail to diagnose pneumoconiosis, especially when the patient is in the early stages of the disease. The tell-tale sign of the disease is nodules in the lungs, which can be as small as 1 mm or 2 mm in diameter. When using X-rays for diagnosis, it is usually possible to pick up on pneumoconiosis only at a later stage, when large masses of dense fibrosis have developed in the lungs. By that stage, there is usually a notable decrease in lung function—in effect, it is too late.

A successful diagnosis is also less likely because of the time that has passed since the pits closed. The doctor they see now, who examines the X-ray, is less likely to have specialist knowledge of the industry and related illnesses. They are also less likely to have seen this disease before, so are perhaps less likely to spot it.

For the best results and the quickest analysis, a CT scan is the most effective diagnostic tool. CT scans show the lungs in three dimensions, which provides far greater detail and allows for a more accurate diagnosis. For many of us, it is surprising to learn that there is not a regular screening programme in place for former coalminers to pick up cases of pneumoconiosis and other lung conditions. Many former miners received their last X-ray at work. When miners retire or are made redundant, their access to regular X-rays simply stops. Former miners then tend not to receive another until they present to their GP with symptoms such as breathing difficulties or a persistent cough. Many fear that they have cancer, and are given a CT scan only to find that it is in fact pneumoconiosis.

It is important to note that the latency period for pneumoconiosis is about 10 years, but can be as long as 15 to 20 years. The lack of regular screening once a miner leaves that environment and retires is clearly a problem. I am aware of several cases in my constituency of miners who received the all-clear for pneumoconiosis after getting old-fashioned X-rays at work, but were subsequently diagnosed with pneumoconiosis after CT scans revealed evidence of the disease.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. I have personal experience of lung disease in the family. Both of my grandfathers were miners, and some of their lung issues did not come to the fore until at least a decade after they left the pit. I want to emphasise the importance of what he says: we need to ensure that there is support throughout the process and throughout people’s lives.

Ben Bradley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is a prime example of why it is important that assessment is ongoing and people who used to work down the mines have access to diagnosis and treatment throughout the rest of their lives.

A few years ago, the Union of Democratic Mineworkers decided to run a test case. The UDM paid for five former miners who had recently been made redundant to have CT scans. The men had all received recent occupational X-rays at the colliery, and each had received the all-clear from those scans, but when the five men went for CT scans, two were diagnosed with pneumoconiosis. Interestingly, two of the other three men were diagnosed with other health issues, which had previously been unseen in the X-rays. Four out of five had conditions that required a CT scan to get a diagnosis. Surely it is clear that former mineworkers are at high risk of many different respiratory health problems, and that a CT scan is the most effective tool for diagnosis.

At present, the reality is that without post-retirement screening for pneumoconiosis, and with standard guidance from the DWP and the Department of Health promoting X-rays for testing, many cases are not picked up until it...
is too late. It is a sad truth that pneumoconiosis is often noted in a patient’s file for the first time when they receive a diagnosis of lung cancer or other advanced respiratory illness. That is clearly unacceptable.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman is saying. I just want to mention the compensation scheme. When people are deceased, if somebody other than the widow claims for compensation, it is incredibly onerous and expensive and there are many hurdles in the way. Does he agree that that process needs to be simplified and expensive hurdles scrapped?

Ben Bradley: I agree that it is important that people have access to the compensation that they rightly deserve, and that that should be as simple a process as possible. Key to that is diagnosing the condition in the first place. To get access to that compensation, they have to prove that they have the condition, which has to be diagnosed.

The issue of pneumoconiosis testing has been batted about between the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department of Health and regional clinical commissioning groups for too long. Miners are rightly entitled to compensation and access to benefits as a result of work-related illnesses including pneumoconiosis. The compensation provides lump-sum payments to sufferers and their dependants. The Government have a duty to look after those who suffer from diseases caused by their working environment. Hard-working coalminers deserve their rightful compensation and disability benefits when their working environment has left them with an incurable illness. If individuals are not diagnosed at an early stage, they miss out on not only vital healthcare but the welfare support that they deserve.

To successfully claim compensation, miners must prove that they have pneumoconiosis. Again, this is where we run into issues. The DWP also relies on X-rays to provide evidence of pneumoconiosis for compensation claims. The compensation assessments are problematic. Former miners are frequently tested with digital X-rays, but even the newer technology struggles to pick up on the true condition of the lungs. Often the image is not clear enough to confidently diagnose pneumoconiosis. In such instances, if their claim is denied by the DWP, the miner will lodge an appeal. That takes considerable time and effort, and it will draw on DWP staff time and resources as applications are processed for a second time. In order to appeal the decision, miners may undergo further diagnostic testing, including the all-important CT scan, which is an additional expense and carries an additional exposure to radiation.

The argument against the use of CT scans usually focuses on two elements. One is the cost of the scans compared to that of X-rays, and the other is increased exposure to radiation. In reality, if coalminers with suspected pneumoconiosis do not receive a scan the first time, they are often exposed to repeated X-rays over a long period and then eventually a CT scan anyway—often when their condition has deteriorated. That is more time-consuming in the long run, ultimately costs more and can involve increased exposure to harmful radiation.

In this debate, I am asking not for a radical change to the testing programme for all lung-related compensation and disability claims, but simply an acknowledgment that former coalminers are at high risk of lung conditions and that the diagnosis of pneumoconiosis, particularly in the early stages, inevitably requires a CT scan rather than an X-ray. There is a clear argument that the Department should consider CT scans as the definitive gold standard for the investigation process in pneumoconiosis claims.

There is a real possibility that thousands of former mineworkers are living with pneumoconiosis, but have no idea that they have the disease. Their occupational X-rays may have showed nothing and, even if they raise health concerns with their GP years later, there is every possibility that they will again receive only an X-ray, which does not show enough detail to diagnose the condition.

The UDM is based in my constituency. I recently met Jeff Wood, the national president, and Ian Gill, the social insurance officer, who work on pneumoconiosis claims. They explained to me in great detail a number of cases that they have personally seen where miners suffered for years without an official diagnosis. It is easy to sit in Parliament and look at issues on paper, but it is important to remember that there are real people behind those studies, and real families who would benefit from a relatively small and easy policy change.

Any former miners who have had unnecessary delays in receiving their diagnosis should receive the compensation and benefits that they are entitled to. I ask the Minister to work with the Department of Health and Social Care to bring about change and to ensure that people who are entitled to support for pneumoconiosis can access it at the earliest opportunity.

There are several clear benefits to the DWP working with the Department of Health and Social Care to replace standard X-rays with CT scans. Earlier diagnosis for patients will allow them to make the necessary lifestyle changes to improve their overall health.

Gloria De Piero: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that when producing new proposals, policies or guidelines, Ministers should consult with the trade unions—not only the Union of Democratic Mineworkers but the National Union of Mineworkers.

Ben Bradley: Of course, it is important that everyone involved is encouraged to talk to GPs and to the Government. I am sure that we can do more with that. I mention the UDM simply because it brought the issue to my attention.

We can achieve earlier access to compensation and benefit support from the DWP. There are potential cost savings for the NHS, because an initial CT scan will help to avoid repeated X-rays, GP appointments and out-patient visits, as well as helping the patient to be healthier and less reliant on those services. There will also be a reduction in the number of appeals to the DWP for compensation claims, because the evidence will be provided in the first instance, and a potential reduction in future disability claims, because sufferers will be able to take action sooner to improve their lung function and overall health before it deteriorates.

The DWP needs to take the lead on what is, of course, a work-related disease. In an ideal world, former mineworkers would be offered additional testing at their GP and local health clinics. We need national
action because, once again, we face a postcode lottery in terms of the support offered to miners. Some areas fare considerably better than others.

In Mansfield, we are lucky that the unions offer support to former miners. There are also other areas of the country where former miners receive brilliant help and support. In Rotherham, the BreathingSpace community service helps people with a wide range of respiratory conditions. It provides a number of health services but, importantly, also helps individuals and families to access welfare and benefits advice. That is an example of unified working across departments, with benefits advice available in a healthcare setting. As ever, the most successful programmes are those that offer a joined-up approach.

I urge the DWP to support that joined-up approach. Ideally, the DWP and the Department of Health and Social Care will agree that a CT scan is the most effective way to diagnose pneumoconiosis. I ask the Minister to commit to a review into whether her Department’s assessments for pneumoconiosis compensation can use CT scans as the default diagnostic tool. I hope the DWP will work with the Department of Health and Social Care to make that happen. It is a relatively simple change that should not be too hard to implement but could make a real difference to thousands of former mineworkers and their families.

I understand that the UDM recently met my right hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Penny Mordaunt) when she was a Minister at the DWP, and she expressed sympathy with its campaign. I hope the new Minister will also be inclined to give the issue the immediate attention it deserves.

It is appalling that former miners are suffering unnecessarily and missing out on the compensation and access to benefits that they deserve. There is a postcode lottery and inconsistent access to CT scans. A national system led by the DWP in co-operation with the Department of Health and Social Care could deliver more effective testing and better results. That could help to cut costs, reduce waiting times and most importantly, provide the best support to individuals at the earliest opportunity.

This is not an abstract discussion. The disease affects large numbers of former miners, including people in my constituency, daily, and their families suffer too. It is a progressive disease, but if sufferers are diagnosed at an early stage, they can receive care and support quickly, and access the compensation and benefits that they deserve. We must not let our former coalminers down.

11.14 am

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing this important debate. In his short time in the House, he has proven to be an extremely effective constituency MP. I also acknowledge the contribution of his neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), who has focused continually on pneumoconiosis and its impact on former miners in his constituency. I am pleased to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) in the Chamber, and I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield said, pneumoconiosis is a serious disease that is common—too common—among former miners. It is a sad legacy of their exposure to dust, particularly coal dust, while working in the mines. I reassure him that the Government are committed to supporting former miners who have developed pneumoconiosis. Through the industrial injuries scheme, we spend £900 million a year on weekly benefits to support around 300,000 people for injuries arising from industrial accidents or from specific occupationally caused diseases.

In addition, lump sum payments are available through the Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers’ Compensation) Act 1979. In 2016-17, more than 3,000 people received payments under the scheme totalling almost £42 million. Last month, I was pleased to demonstrate our ongoing commitment to that support by proposing measures to increase the value of lump sum awards by 3% from April. The coal industry pneumoconiosis compensation scheme—sometimes referred to as the coal workers pneumoconiosis scheme—is also available and has received 91,000 claims from mineworkers and their families since it was set up.

The hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) raised the issue of processing applications. I would be pleased to receive details of her concerns, because the devil is always in the detail. By reviewing those constituency cases, I can consider what more we can do to improve the process. We want to ensure that people get the compensation that they richly deserve and are entitled to.

I acknowledge the suffering of individuals with the disease. Coal workers’ pneumoconiosis, which arises from the inhalation of coal dust, is one of the most commonly occurring types of pneumoconiosis. Thankfully, many ex-miners with pneumoconiosis will have the simple type, which may not be associated with any disabling effects.

If miners continued to work underground and inhale coal dust, however, they have a higher risk of developing severe disabling effects from progressive massive fibrosis, which affects lung function and causes coughs, wheezing and shortness of breath. That is why working miners are regularly screened by X-ray to identify simple pneumoconiosis early and to remove the person from further dust exposure to prevent progressive massive fibrosis.

The hon. Member for Mansfield (Penny Mordaunt), to discuss a screening programme for ex-miners using CT scanning or chest X-rays to detect pneumoconiosis. At the end of last year, I consulted with national experts and the deputy chief medical officer on all the issues raised at that meeting.

Importantly, there is a big difference between carrying out medical tests on a person with symptoms and carrying out tests on a healthy person. The symptomatic person needs to know what is wrong with them to get an accurate diagnosis so they can receive the right treatment. A healthy person undergoing a screening test believes that they are healthy, and would continue to do so, facing no risks from health interventions. Because a screening programme risks harming people’s health, we demand a high level of evidence to ensure that any screening does no harm and is of genuine overall benefit.
[Sarah Newton]
to people. We have looked at all the evidence, and the view was clearly expressed by medical experts that introducing a screening process in the UK would not meet those evidential thresholds and would not be beneficial. When pneumoconiosis is identified, often no treatment is required, and when it is severe, no specific treatment is available. There is no health benefit to identifying pneumoconiosis at an early stage once a miner has left mining.

The advice that I have been given is that the potential harms from screening for pneumoconiosis by X-ray or CT scans vastly outweigh any gains. However, I am mindful of the information that has been shared in this debate, so I think it is important that I set up a follow-up meeting to explore the matter further with my hon. Friends the Members for Mansfield and for Sherwood, with the Department of Health and Social Care, and with the national health service. Other hon. Members will be welcome to come along, because I am sure they want to know that we are leaving no stone unturned and doing the best we can for former miners.

I am aware that the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council—an independent scientific advisory body that looks at how industrial injuries disablement benefit is administered and provides advice to the Department for Work and Pensions—has discussed the use of CT scans for diagnosing pneumoconiosis, including the risks of increased radiation exposure. However, in the light of the issues raised in this debate, I will approach the council anew and ask it to reconsider the use of CT scans and give me further advice, which I will be happy to share with hon. Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield rightly spoke about raising awareness among former miners, who too often do not come forward because they assume that having coughs and colds is just part of being a miner or former miner. There is much more that we can do to raise awareness among former miners and their families and communities, and to encourage them to come forward and speak to a GP. Much work has been done in the last couple of years on improving the care pathways, and a lot more information and training has been given to GPs, so former miners who come forward now will experience a much better quality of care and a rapid assessment, either by X-ray or by CT scan, of whether they have pneumoconiosis.

I am very grateful to hon. Members present, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield, for raising the issue. I assure them that the Government will continue to support former miners who have pneumoconiosis—not just financially, through all the schemes I have described, but by really looking at their diagnosis and health needs.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Very helpfully and constructively, the Minister says that she is planning a meeting with hon. Members. Would she be content for the National Union of Mineworkers, which is based in my constituency, to be represented at that meeting? The NUM would have a constructive contribution to make to the process.

Sarah Newton: Of course. I am happy to work with anyone who makes a constructive contribution to ensuring that former miners are aware of the risks to their health and seek help at the earliest possible stage. We need to support them in getting not only diagnosis and treatment, but compensation, which we are proudly giving to people who suffer in this way. We must remember that miners contracted pneumoconiosis while making a vital contribution to the growth and prosperity of this country. It is only right that they receive our support when they need it most.

Question put and agreed to.

11.24 am

Sitting suspended.
Victims of Crime: Rights

[MRS ANNE MAIN in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the rights of victims of crime.

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

When I applied for this debate, little did I know how timely it would be. On Friday night, both our car and our garage were broken into. Nothing was stolen, but the damage to our property and knowing that we are vulnerable to criminals are concerns, and I redoubled my resolve to get better rights for the victims of crime.

Last week, in advance of this debate, I surveyed constituents on their experiences and two of the respondents spoke about the lack of support they had also experienced after being victims of theft from their cars. I also had much more concerning examples, where people were victims of serious incidents and there were serious gaps in provision. One constituent who had been at the Manchester Arena for the Ariana Grande concert when the tragic bombing occurred wrote to me, saying:

“Whilst I appreciate thousands were affected by this event, receiving mental health support since then has been hard work. It has taken 9 months for my daughter and I to receive any kind of support due to long waiting lists, lack of funding etc. I was never advised to contact victim support but was advised to contact survivors assistance network based in Warrington. I am in groups on Facebook and yammer where hundreds say the same thing. Those suffering post-traumatic stress disorder have been ignored unless they had physical injuries.”

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is now touching on the key point. Does he agree that very often victims of crime pay a double penalty—the penalty of the financial loss, from the effect of the crime itself; and then the emotional stress resulting from what has happened?

Alex Sobel: I do, and that is doubly so when there is an event as serious as the Manchester bombing. After that incident, the Government committed to support the victims, but nearly a year later some families are still not receiving the support they need.

When I undertook the survey, a range of crimes were reported to me and often the victims did not feel that they had received sufficient support after crimes ranging from muggings to violent assault to rape. This debate is very much needed, to address the inconsistencies in the system, and I am sure that many hon. Members will also share the experiences of their constituents.

A group in society that is particularly vulnerable to crime is older people. I am grateful to Age UK for releasing a report last week on fraud relating to older people. The report found that more than two fifths—43%—of older people, which is almost 5 million people, believe they have been targeted by fraudsters. Only a minority of fraud victims report their experience. Among people aged 65-plus, nearly two thirds—64%—of those targeted by fraudsters did not report it to an official body such as Action Fraud, the police, a bank or a local authority. About a third of those targeted confided in friends or family, but more than a fifth admitted they did not tell anyone at all, because they felt too embarrassed. And for the minority of older people who do report fraud, support is inconsistent across the country.

Age UK has won funding from City Bridge Trust to pilot a new scam prevention and victim support service. Working in partnership with Action Fraud, a number of local Age UK groups in London will raise awareness of scams among older people and their friends and family; they will give one-to-one support to older people who are vulnerable and at risk of scams, empowering them to feel safer and more confident; and they will provide specialist one-to-one support sessions for older victims, helping them to address the financial, health and social impacts of fraud.

This is a great initiative. However, should not such support be available across the country for every older person who needs it, funded by the Government, and using proceeds of crime moneys if the Government cannot pay for it out of general taxation? Our criminal justice system must ensure that it has the rights of victims of crime at its heart.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate, which is very timely. He is talking about the changing nature of crime, so does he agree that the Minister should be considering reviewing the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, so that its guidelines reflect the changing nature of crime?

Alex Sobel: That is a very good point, well made, and I hope that the Minister will address it in his remarks.

As I was saying, our criminal justice system must ensure that it has the rights of victims of crime at its heart. When it fails to do so, it not only affects the direct victims themselves but risks undermining wider public trust in our justice system.

The most significant reform in this regard was arguably the introduction of the victims code by the last Labour Government, which came into force in 2006. The victims code sets out the rights and entitlements of victims, making it the single most important document for victims of crime in England and Wales. It outlines clearly and precisely the level of entitlement that victims can expect from each criminal justice agency they encounter, including the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service. For example, the code specifies that victims are entitled to be kept informed of developments in their case within set time limits, and that victims must be informed of any sentence handed down to the offender and what it means.

Victim Support has found evidence to suggest that there is a routine failure to uphold the victims code. The lack of compliance could be due to the victims code not being legally enforceable, or the absence of a mechanism to hold agencies to account except in individual cases, or the lack of an independent body to monitor implementation. Current monitoring arrangements rely on statutory agencies self-assessing their compliance, based on criteria determined by the agencies themselves. Effectively, these agencies are self-regulating.

There are new setbacks for victims of crime on the horizon, with the announcement that the Government plan to sell off more than 100 courts for not much more than the average UK house price. That decision piles yet more pressure on the remaining courts and risks hearings
being further delayed and rescheduled, which can have a distressing impact on victims and witnesses and creates a justice system that is less accessible for people.

The Victims’ Commissioner has within their remit a duty to “keep under review the operation of the Code of Practice”. The current Victims’ Commissioner, Baroness Newlove, has conducted a number of reviews of the code, looking at issues such as the victim personal statement, children’s entitlements and the complaints system. A number of other agencies have also looked at compliance with the victims code in some form, including the CPS, which undertook a victim and witness satisfaction survey in 2015 and plans to repeat the research, and the criminal justice inspectorates.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has brought a very important issue to Westminster Hall this afternoon. I am particularly concerned about the effect of the problems in the disclosure system of the CPS and other agencies for victims. I have had considerable problems with child sexual exploitation in my constituency. Those victims are particularly vulnerable. Is that something that he is also worried about?

Alex Sobel: I am very glad that the hon. Lady has raised this issue. It is not something that I have personally had experience of, but I am sure that her points are really well made and I hope that the Minister addresses them in his remarks.

Finally, victims’ organisations such as Victim Support have also looked at compliance with the code by means of research that has examined different issues, including the timeliness of victim contact. However, all these reviews have been piecemeal, looking at certain aspects of the code but not at the code’s operation as a whole. There is a gap in the system, and an effective monitoring and enforcement mechanism would enable the Government to ensure that the victims code is implemented throughout the system, as well as identifying both good practice and areas for improvement.

Last year, Victim Support published research undertaken with almost 400 victims, which highlighted the failings inherent in the system. These failings include the fact that 52% of victims surveyed were not offered the chance to make a victim personal statement; that 46% of victims surveyed had not received a written acknowledgment of the crime from the police; and that 19% had not been referred to support services. So, nearly one in five of the people who responded were not even referred to support services. As things stand, too many people are being failed by the system, so things need to change.

What do victims of crime need from the Government? Victims must always feel that the justice system is on their side. When a member of the public comes forward to report a crime or to give evidence in court, they must be treated fairly and with compassion. When all is said and done, we must do our utmost to ensure that victims receive the justice they deserve.

What is needed is a victims’ law, which the 2015 Conservative party manifesto pledged to introduce; the Minister will find that pledge on page 59. In the 2015 Queen’s Speech, the Government announced:

“Measures will be brought forward to increase the rights of victims of crime.”—[Official Report, 27 May 2015; Vol. 596, c. 31.]

In 2016, the EU victims’ directive forced the Government to enhance support for victims of crime by broadening the definition of “victim”. Previously, for example, victims of drink-driving did not receive support under the victims code, and not all victims of crime were entitled to a written acknowledgment from the police.

In 2017, the Conservative manifesto again contained a commitment to enshrine victims’ entitlements in law. However, aside from a recent and welcome announcement that there will be consultation on new legislation to support victims of domestic abuse, there appears to have been little action by the Government to bring forward their victims’ law commitment. I want to see victims’ support at the heart of the criminal justice system and historic wrongs put right.

A victims’ law would seek to guarantee victims a minimum standard of service, including placing victims’ right to review on a statutory footing, not only for the CPS but for the police, too. It must be made easier to hold justice organisations to account if we are to maintain confidence in the criminal justice system. I therefore ask the Minister to introduce proposals for a victims’ law that fulfils the historic commitment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Quite a few right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye. I will call the Front Benchers at half-past 3. I call Kevin Foster.

2.40 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Thank you for calling me so early, Mrs Main. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) on securing this debate on such a major issue. I will explore how victims are heard and the penalties for offenders, and how they relate to the changing nature of crime and to people actually realising that they are victims, which is a particular issue for some of my constituents.

I have always been a fan of more restorative justice. St Martin’s church in Barton in my constituency was attacked by vandals who were just over the age of criminal responsibility. A restorative path was chosen, as it was felt that the two individuals coming to the church, meeting the vicar and hearing from the churchwarden about the effect of what they had done would have a far greater impact on them than a police officer bluntly giving them a caution, or their potentially going before a youth court. The church continues to engage with the two young men and their families, trying to make them see clearly that the church is part of the community and the impact on those who were damaged.

On a wider scale, the offender management team in Torbay tries to use more restorative justice, particularly for lower-level offending that would not attract significant terms of imprisonment. Genuine restorative justice can be more effective than a blunt fine, which might disappear into a court or be added to a list of other fines being paid off via earnings or welfare benefits attachments; it can be something that might stick in someone’s memory.
It has been interesting talking to the local police in Torbay about an emerging trend, whereby people—mostly older men—with assets are targeted by ruthless individuals who look to exploit them by forming a relationship with them, even a sexual one, with the purpose of getting at their bank balance and draining their assets. When it is happening, many of these people do not realise they are victims; some might not even see it after the person unsurprisingly disappears, when the money starts to run out or when other members of the family start to get involved. How do we get people to understand the nature of being a victim today? Some people do not see it, and some fail to understand what their assets are worth—some who are starting to suffer dementia will not realise that the price of something 30 or 40 years ago is not its value today.

Sarah Champion: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when the person involved has learning difficulties or mental health issues the crime needs to be designated as a hate crime and afforded the additional sentence for the perpetrator?

Kevin Foster: The courts should certainly consider it an aggravating factor if someone is vulnerable. However, it is a difficult line to draw for people who have not yet been diagnosed or been deemed to have lack of capacity—those who are still able to manage themselves and their finances in day-to-day life. They might have started to lose track of exactly what they are worth, or they might not have been as wealthy in their younger days but have now had a retirement golden handshake or have bought a house or another asset that is worth far more than they realise. I agree that the courts should certainly consider that as an aggravating factor, because this is almost the ultimate breach of trust: someone professing love and affection, targeting the fact that someone is vulnerable and lonely.

For me, this is also about victims coming forward. I am pleased to see some of the efforts being made regarding domestic abuse, including the Bill that is to be introduced. I will not give their name, because it is not appropriate, but someone I am very close to was a victim of domestic abuse for more than 30 years. For most of that period, they did not realise that they were a victim; they thought that that was what most marriages were like—husbands beat their wives. It was only when others started to guess what was going on that they realised that they were a victim of very serious offences. The offender has now passed away.

I am conscious that other colleagues would like to speak, so I will conclude by saying that I welcome this debate. It is important that victims are at the heart of the criminal justice system and are the ones who matter; they are not just a statement of evidence or part of a case. Justice has to be seen to be done, not just according to the law but according to the victims as well.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I am sure all Members will recognise the feeling I am about to describe, although perhaps with a different landmark in mind: when I travel home after a long week here I have the Humber bridge and I know that that means home—I am nearly there; it is not far to go. Home should be the place where we feel the safest, where we feel secure, but sadly, for many of my constituents and many others around the country, crime and antisocial behaviour are hitting them right in the heart of their lives—in their home. I will use my speech today to raise my constituents’ concerns about antisocial behaviour. Sometimes it is dismissed as not really a big deal, but in reality it affects the lives of many people.

My constituency is a wonderful place to live and grow up in, but sadly many areas are now blighted by antisocial behaviour. In the Hessle part of the constituency, I hear many reports of children creating lots of difficulties—for example, running in front of buses and making them do emergency stops with the passengers still on them, upsetting people in the street, throwing dog dirt through pub doors, damaging car park fences, standing on signs, climbing on to walls and generally making people feel unsafe and unhappy in what is a wonderful community and place to live. An elderly lady told me that as she was walking down the street, groups of young people passing on their bikes shouted abuse at her; she is now worried about what might happen when she goes out to do her shopping.

Sadly, that is not the only area of my constituency where there are problems. I have been contacted by residents of the Great Thornton Street flats, an inner-city tower block, who are being subjected to hate crime. Some of them are having their scarves pulled off their heads. They are witnessing drug abuse and violence and even finding human faeces in the corners outside their homes. The situation is no better in Bean Street, where there is much public drug taking and antisocial behaviour. I have been told that on more than one occasion a nearby park has attracted drinkers and drug users shooting up in broad daylight.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate, Mrs Main. My hon. Friend refers to hate crime and I wondered whether she was aware that some of us Muslim Members of Parliament have been victims of a hate crime on the parliamentary estate today and yesterday. I could not be here at 2.30 pm because I was dealing with the aftermath of a suspicious package intended for me, which was opened by one of my staff.

My hon. Friend talks about crime at home. Does she not agree that thousands of British people abroad who are victims of crime need a better support system? My constituent Susan Sutovic—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady was late. I have allowed the explanation but she is making an extremely long intervention. Perhaps the speaker will reply.

Emma Hardy: Yes, I would support that. I am so sorry to hear about the incident that my hon. Friend mentions and I sincerely hope that she and her staff are okay. It is sad to hear about the increasing amount of hate crime.

I am trying to arrange residents meetings with the police on the issues in Hessle, Bean Street and Great Thornton Street. Previously, we had success when there were problems with an awful lot of street drinkers in Spring Bank. We removed the bench where they were sitting and there have been 46 move-ons for people drinking when they should not be and creating antisocial behaviour problems. The police have been fantastic, but my fear is that all we are doing by going in with this
intensive support from the police and the community is relocating the problem around the city. We never deal with the root cause of the problem or provide a long-term solution; we just move it to another place. Yes, the work on Spring Bank has been successful, but now we have a problem on Bean Street and Great Thornton Street.

Some people dismiss antisocial behaviour. While it may be a different category of crime from some of the others we are discussing, it has a massive effect on people’s lives. It is sad, because often those most in need of help are those least able to seek it. Crime and antisocial behaviour affect people of all incomes and backgrounds, but it seems that the poorest and most vulnerable are disproportionately affected. Sad to say, I do not see the situation changing; because of the cuts to the police service, dealing with the problem will only get much harder.

One of the easiest ways to help victims of crime is to stop crime and antisocial behaviour happening in the first place. A long-term solution needs investment in education, community support and youth provision. I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) talk about the use of restorative justice. Instead of taking a one-size-fits-all approach, it looks at the individuals and the best method to stop them reoffending. More things like that should be happening, especially for younger people committing crimes. I hope that the whole House will therefore join me and my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) as we push to make youth provision statutory, which would force all councils to establish youth provision.

One parent of a child who has been involved in some of the antisocial behaviour contacted me, asking for my help. She said, “Where can my child go? What services are out there? What support can I have?” When family support services have been cut, when youth provision has been cut, and when those families are not getting the support they need when they need it, we cannot be surprised when we see an increase in antisocial behaviour. I am sorry to say that schools are facing the same cuts as well. Perhaps they cannot give as much support as they used to. From the inquiry we are doing in the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) will know about the increased number of children going into alternative provision and being moved on. We need to look at the problem holistically.

Even with more action taken to prevent crime, we still need to protect and promote the rights of victims of crime and ensure that there are minimum standards a victim can expect once a crime has been committed. Constituents in Chislehurst have suffered a spate of residential burglaries. The burglaries are professional, planned and committed with an extraordinary degree of chutzpah. In some cases, the burglars have returned to the same road on more than one occasion within a couple of weeks. The burglaries are of a serious kind: occupants of houses have been threatened—in some cases, they have been young children, and in others, they have been elderly people. The police have many pressures and it is not always possible to find much evidence at the scene. In the case of those professional burglaries, the people have escaped, but there are forensics to be done.

It is important that all police forces recognise that dealing with the victims of crime and investigating crime are not purely transactional processes. A proper duty of care for victims is important. A domestic burglary is peculiarly intrusive and a violation of people’s homes and lives. The hon. Lady fairly made a point about proper points of contact and proper updates and information, which are critical. It is important that a degree of urgency is applied to offences of this kind, even in a large police force such as the Met. There is resource within the budget. I know there are pressures, but priority should be given to dealing with those sorts of issues and keeping people informed.

I want to talk about the operation of the criminal justice system as it impacts victims. The Justice Select Committee, which I have the honour to chair, has looked at that in a number of areas. I start with the point that was made by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) began, which is how victims are treated once a crime has been committed. Constituents in Chislehurst have suffered a spate of residential burglaries. The burglaries are professional, planned and committed with an extraordinary degree of chutzpah. In some cases, the burglars have returned to the same road on more than one occasion within a couple of weeks. The burglaries are of a serious kind: occupants of houses have been threatened—in some cases, they have been young children, and in others, they have been elderly people. The police have many pressures and it is not always possible to find much evidence at the scene. In the case of those professional burglaries, the people have escaped, but there are forensics to be done.

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The experience of victims giving evidence needs to be made as palatable as possible. Any witness has to expect to be properly cross-examined, and any defendant has the right to have the case against them tested, but there are parameters in which that must be done decently and without undue pressure. The Government have recognised that in the cross-examination of victims of domestic abuse. It is important that we build upon the work already done on the pre-recorded cross-examination of witnesses and the use of video links. We must ensure that the video links work, which sadly is not always the case in every court. We therefore have to ensure that the court estate and technology are up to speed. That is an important thing we need to do now.

I am glad to see the Minister in his place. I know he is very engaged with these matters, and I recently wrote to him about the position of training and mentoring for registered intermediaries. Court intermediaries provide communication support for vulnerable witnesses—many of them are victims, but there may be other vulnerable witnesses, too. There appears to have been a significant reduction in the period of training they undergo. Can the Minister offer some explanation, either now or subsequently, as to why that has happened? I accept there are pressures, but can he give us an assurance that he will ensure that the level of service provided to vulnerable people assisting in the court process to try to deliver justice is not diminished? I am sure he will be aware that the Victims’ Commissioner's research indicates poor overall management in the governance of intermediaries and a lack of funding. They perform an important role, and I hope the issue can be taken much more seriously.

I will briefly move on to restorative justice and the victims’ law, which was referred to by the hon. Member for Leeds North West. One of the proposals that the Select Committee made was that any victims’ law should include a right not just to information about restorative justice, as is the case at the moment, but a right of access to it. Provision is extremely patchy across the country. Some police and crime commissioners—I am delighted to see the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) in his place; he did a great deal as the police and crime commissioner for Greater Manchester—engage in that, but others do not. It is important that the Government perhaps do more to enforce a proper minimum standard. There is always scope for local variation to meet local needs, but a basic standard must be adhered to in all cases. If we are going to have a right, it is important that we have a means of ensuring it and some remedy if it is not actually delivered. That was reported on at some length in our Committee’s report of September 2016, which was debated in Westminster Hall in January 2017. The Government indicated that they were taking steps; we welcomed those, and urge them to do more, as more needs to be done. I hope that the Minister can confirm that work is continuing on this matter, and that the Government remain committed to a victims’ law. Can he give us some sense of when we are likely to see more proposals on that?

Finally, it is important and topical for us to consider the role of victims when Parole Board decisions are made. I will not say anything about any particular case that is sub judice, but we must examine this issue. The point about communication is hugely important. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) talked about restorative justice in that context. We have to have a whole-system approach. It is not just about when the person is sentenced and dealt with.

Victoria Prentis: Does my hon. Friend agree that we should look at both statutory victims and the wider collection of victims in that context?

Robert Neill: That is absolutely right. That is a most important matter. The chair of the Parole Board himself, Professor Nick Hardwick, to whom I pay tribute for his openness with us, recognises that the current rules are not as he would wish them to be. They sometimes make it hard for the Parole Board to be as transparent as it would like to be, for the benefit of either the victim or the general public. On the face of it, that is a difficult distinction to justify in some cases, so I hope that in due course the Government will look at that. It indicates to me a need for a much more holistic approach to how we look at victims throughout both the investigatory process and the criminal justice process.

I commend the hon. Member for Leeds North West for securing the debate, and look forward to the Minister’s response.

3.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in today’s debate. I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for presenting the case, and for giving us all more time than there might have been to speak on the matter. I am also conscious that you have indicated the timescale to which we all have to try to adhere, Mrs Main.

The issue of victims is incredibly sensitive and needs to be handled with care. There are many victims of physical, emotional and sexual assault who have been re-traumatised—I have said this before, in questions to the Minister in the Chamber—through the handling of their case. Many victims will not come forward, as they fear as if they are on trial themselves, and are not supported. I recently read an article on abortion by a baroness in Ireland. Although this is not the debate in which to bring up the abortion issue, I felt it was significant that she lost her baby as she was caught up in an IRA bombing. She describes herself and her child as victims, and remains traumatised to this day. Time has not healed that wound; she feels the pain of loss to this day, and will do so beyond. This is how we need to consider victims: not that something once happened to them, but that their life was irrevocably changed, and that that change has become part of their day-to-day life. They need care and help to go over that, and to deal with the aftermath.

We have a duty to victims to ensure that they are heard and supported. That was what was agreed when we passed the legislation, and voted to help to make victims feel secure and to create a system whereby crimes could be prosecuted, and victims could feel safe and able to feed into the process. Although the spirit of the current legislation agrees with that, there is no enforcement process. I ask the Minister how we move from guidelines and perceived support to enforcement.

It is little wonder that Baroness Newlove’s report in January 2015, “A Review of Complaints and Resolution for Victims of Crime”, found not very satisfactory results—that is how it was reported. It surveyed the experiences of some 200 victims and found that
almost 75% were unhappy with the response they received. More than 50% found the relevant agency’s complaints process difficult to use. Have we moved on from that? Is the process easier? Is it more relevant?

A second review, “The Silenced Victim: A Review of the Victim Personal Statement”, was published in November 2015. It found inconsistencies in approach, with six out of 10 victims not recalling being offered the chance to make a victim personal statement. That also illustrates the things that we need to be addressing. I look to the Minister to see whether he can address those issues and give us the responses that we wish to hear.

To me, this says that what we set out to achieve through the legislation is not being achieved. We therefore need to make changes. First, we need to stop it being no more than a guideline or a suggestion, and ensure that it is enforceable and as much a duty in the prosecution of a case as any other aspect, such as evidence gathering.

Dr Huq: The hon. Gentleman talked about there not always being an audit trail. Does he agree with me that when victims of crime are abroad, such as my constituent Susan Sutovic, whose son died in mysterious circumstances in 2004 in Serbia, there needs to be some sort of diplomatic and legal framework to help those victims?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention; I agree with her. It is important that we have a framework in place. Hopefully the Minister, who I know is taking notes on the debate, will give us some response on how he sees that changing.

The care of the victim must be paramount and be seen as part and parcel of the justice system. I agree with the options presented in the Victim Support manifesto. There should be a single complaints system for victims of crime, a more powerful Victims’ Commissioner, and better communication with victims about the outcomes of their case—how often that falls down. Court compensation should be paid immediately and not linger on for months or sometimes years. Trained intermediaries should be available for all child witnesses—I know a lot of Members in the Chamber feel as strongly as I do about that. No child should be obliged to enter a court building to give evidence. There should be pre-trial therapy for all victims of sexual crimes, and a national strategy for victims with mental health issues. Like others, I feel strongly on behalf of children about how their cases are handled. Again, I look to the Minister to see what help he can give us.

It is essential that these foundations, which are not currently in place, are in place for victims. The end goal is justice for the crime and for the victim. The crime has to have the right sentence, but the victim must also feel part of the process and feel that they are not being put upon by the court system. I hate to hear of crimes that could not be prosecuted as the key witness is frightened to come forward. Knowing that a system is in place to support victims is a key component in the prosecution of crimes. Again, I look to the Minister for a response on that.

I will conclude, as I am conscious of the time I agreed with you beforehand, Mrs Main. I again thank the hon. Member for Leeds North West for introducing the debate. I thank Baroness Newlove for her hard work in making a difference to the lives and experiences of victims. It is now in the hands of the Government—and perhaps the Minister in this case—to bring forward the promised changes. I for one will be eagerly awaiting the legislation that is to be introduced.

3.6 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Thank you, Mrs Main, for allowing me to speak in this important debate. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) has given us the opportunity to talk about the rights of victims and some of the difficulties that they have in getting their voices heard.

I particularly want to talk about the victims of child exploitation, following revelations in newspapers over the weekend in my constituency. These victims have more difficulties than most in getting heard, and in identifying that they are indeed victims, as my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Kevin Foster) identified. Child sexual exploitation is not just any crime. It affects whole communities up and down the country; it is not just Telford. It is a crime about fear, manipulation, coercion, shame, control, and sometimes blame. All too often, the victims are ignored. They are victims who do not have a voice, and for whom very few people will stand up and speak. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for the amazing work that she has done in this field over so many years. She has given a voice to victims, and has set a precedent for us to follow in this House.

These young girls are too often white and working-class, and have multiple vulnerabilities. That is why the perpetrators are targeting them, and why they are so often miscast as bringing it on themselves, as indulging in risky behaviour, as being promiscuous and as somehow being to blame for what is happening to them. In their own minds, they often internalise the sense that they are somehow at fault.

When a 13 or 14-year-old girl is befriended by a 35-year-old man who gives her affection and cigarettes, tops up her phone, and tells her that she is beautiful and that he loves her, sometimes she feels affection for him. She does not realise that when he asks her to share a sexual image of herself, that will lead to something worse—something that she will not want to do. The coercion begins when he says, “If you don’t have sex with me”—or, “If you don’t have sex with my friend”—“I’m going to out you as promiscuous,” or as a “sket”, as they say in Telford. That is when it becomes a crime, but at that point, a 13 or 14-year-old does not know that what is happening is rape and child sexual exploitation. If she goes to the police, what does she say? She does not say, “I am a victim of statutory rape.” She says, “I’m being harassed by this person. He’s threatened to take a picture and put it on Facebook. He’s threatened to tell my mum that I’m a prostitute.”

Too often, victims of such terrible crimes do not articulate what is happening to them, so we have to be incredibly sensitive with them. Too often, they are not heard because of their vulnerabilities. I worry that a difficult family background or drugs and alcohol or mental health issues at home mean that victims are often cast as bringing it on themselves and just a bit too difficult. Perhaps that is why these crimes were not identified for so long. Had the girls been from a different background and able to articulate more clearly what was happening
to them, or able to identify that it was a crime, perhaps we would not have the cases that we see in Telford, Rotherham and Oxford.

Sarah Champion: I want to get on the record how incredible the hon. Lady has been for those women and girls. She is giving them a voice and empowering them to be heard. I am honoured to be here listening to her speech. I am sorry this is not an appropriate intervention, but it needed to be said.

Lucy Allan: I thank the hon. Lady for her encouragement and the inspiration that she provides to me and others in speaking out on this matter.

Interestingly, each child sexual exploitation case bears some resemblance to others. They all start in the same way and progress in the same way, from something that seems quite acceptable, tame or innocent into something horrific: trading young girls for sex for money. They are traded and handed around with the threat of violence to them or their families, or the threat of exposure and shame that I talked about earlier. The victims need to know that they have not done anything wrong. They need to know that they are victims, and that a crime has been committed against them. That is why I am asking for an independent investigation into what has gone wrong in Telford. I first made the request in 2016, when there were revelations about what had happened. That request was turned down by the local authorities in Telford, who felt that there was no need at that time.

Further revelations have come to light. Nothing in the interim has changed my mind that an independent investigation will give victims a sense that they are being listened to. It will also give them answers as to why the situation went on for so long and why no action was taken. How did it happen? Why are our young girls being traded for sex in what has become a routine way? Whether it is from takeaways, taxis or betting shops, it is happening in our streets.

By not addressing what went wrong, victims are left feeling that in some sense they were at fault. It ignores what happened and perpetuates the silence. We have to break that silence and say it is okay to talk about this, and that it will not bring shame on Oxford, Telford or Rotherham or on their families. They are the victims and they need to be heard, listened to and given the protection that they need and deserve. Being questioned and questioned is an ordeal, and sometimes they feel they are not believed, but we must believe those young people and give them a sense that they will be listened to. There should not be opposition to finding out the facts and what went wrong.

There is a national inquiry into child sexual exploitation led by Professor Jay. That inquiry will not get to the bottom of why these things happened or give answers to my constituents in Telford. I urge the Minister, or anybody listening, to please put pressure on the authorities. It is for the good of our community and the victims and their families, because the families are victims too. They feel they failed their children and let them down. They suffer because their child has experienced terrible things. We must not allow these crimes to be minimised. They are not trivial. I am not talking about a girl with a 35-year-old boyfriend; I am talking about someone who is abused, exploited and sold for sex. We should not shy away from that and bury our heads in the sand.

I will draw to a close, but while the Minister is here I want to quickly mention the early release from prison of Mubarak Ali, a ringleader in Telford. He had been sentenced to 22 years—14 years in custody and eight years on licence—and he was released only five years after the trial. That caused a lot of shock, fear and anxiety among the people brave enough to come forward to give evidence, and the victim contact scheme let them down. More work must be done to ensure that victims are kept informed and can feed into the process and have the opportunity to be heard. We must listen and hear the voices of those children.

3.16 pm

Tony Lloyd: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for securing this really important debate. We have heard many important contributions. Like the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan), I have had to live through the aftermath of child sexual exploitation in my area. She is absolutely right in everything she says. We must never blame the victims. We must stand up and speak out for victims of criminal behaviour. I encourage her to continue to demand that there is proper insight. In the end, all local agencies must demonstrate that they have genuinely, not formulatively, learnt lessons. They must demonstrate a different way of working that makes it more likely that we ask questions when a 14-year-old has a 35-year-old boyfriend.

I will make a few brief points, Mrs Main, because I know you are anxious to bring in the Front-Bench speakers at—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): At 15.29, so you have a while. Ms Huq may or may not wish to speak.

Tony Lloyd: I will not take long, in that case. The comments of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) are really important. Antisocial behaviour matters. Actually, it kills in the worst situations, and even if we are not talking about those extremes it certainly makes people’s lives miserable. It destroys the quality of people’s lives and we must take that seriously. She is right. Obviously, this can be a political point, but the Government must take it on board that it has become much more difficult now for our police to investigate things that fall off the radar, which they simply ought not. It is an important issue to raise.

Like the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster), I am a big supporter of restorative justice. I regret that I was not in the House in 2016 to speak on the Select Committee report, but I was aware of its conclusions. Restorative justice fundamentally delivers to victims the sense that their needs are being taken seriously. That is as important in prosecutions as when there is a decision not to take a case forward, which can sometimes be appropriate.

I think of the case of a woman who was a very strong advocate. Other hon. Members might have heard her speak. Her house was burgled and a new camera was taken. Sadly, her daughter was killed in a car crash weeks later and the last remaining photographs of her daughter were lost with the camera. She never saw the photographs but she was prepared to work with the perpetrator, who went to prison. That was important for at least giving her a sense of easement, although you
can never reconcile yourself to the loss of a child. It also meant that that long-term burglar effectively ceased his former habit, so it worked in more than one way, but—there is always a “but”—training is absolutely important. We cannot see the process as something to be delivered on the streets, with no training. There must be supervision to ensure that standards are maintained. Importantly, there must be victim volition. The process cannot be forced on a victim, or denied to a victim who is not aware that they could demand it. I support the call for a statutory framework, and of course my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West argued for that.

Robert Neill: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is back in the House after a brief gap. I hope he will take part in further debates. Given what he has said, does he agree on the importance of the point made in the Justice Committee report, that restorative justice must always be victim-led—the victim’s choice at all times—and that there must be proper professional support right the way through? It is important that victims be given full information about what is available in their area, and that something genuinely meaningful should be in place—not simply a leaflet.

Tony Lloyd: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman—let me say my hon. Friend for the sake of this debate—is right on both counts. The second point is fundamental in bringing about the first, because if victims do not have confidence in the process it will wither. It is not just victims, in fact, because the community must have confidence, through the victims, that the decisions are not arbitrary, and will deliver something to victims and do something more generally to change behaviour. In the end, the process is about helping victims and changing perpetrators’ behaviour.

Perhaps I may now touch on the rather more aggressive side of what, sadly, happens to victims. Sometimes victims are treated horrendously within the processes. I know that the Minister is sympathetic to these points. Many years ago, I dealt with a grieving family whose son had been stabbed to death at a party. The charge was murder and the case took many months, as such cases do, to come to court. Eventually, on the day of the trial, the family were told that the murder charge could not be sustained, because the prosecuting barrister had said he could not deliver it on the available evidence. No other charge of manslaughter or lesser offences had been brought, and that meant that the two perpetrators went scot-free. The family were left devastated.

That was a long time ago and I would be happy if I could say that those were the bad old days and that things have moved on. However, they have not. Victims still sometimes find that the failure of the prosecution service to examine information in time, or the failure of the courts to process cases, means they face a long journey between becoming a victim and their case coming to court, only to find that when it gets to court they are left frustrated and dissatisfied.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is highlighting important issues to do with the CPS and the rights of victims. Does he agree that one thing that undermines victims of crime is the Crown’s inability to appeal against sentences that are simply too lenient? That can happen only in a very few cases at the moment, and victims of crime feel powerless under the current system to ensure that the appropriate sentence is imposed on an offender.

Tony Lloyd: I have a lot of sympathy with that point. The procedure could not be used in every case, but perhaps society should recognise the need to use it more widely than happens now. Sometimes the courts do get things wrong.

I do not want to go into too much detail about the next case I shall mention. A young woman was effectively kidnapped from a bar, and it was believed that she had been raped. She had certainly been sexually assaulted. She faced months of adjournments and new trial dates. In the end, the case came to court more than two and a half years from the original event. The perpetrator had been charged with rape and the prosecution counsel determined only at a late stage that it was not possible, on the evidence, to sustain that charge. Because no other charges had been laid—not kidnap or sexual assault, which are pretty serious charges—the perpetrator walked free, as in my other example. That is human incompetence, and for the victim it was outrageous. I have spoken to her, and had she known what would happen she would never have consented to the case’s going forward.

Those are cases of human error, but such human error is systemic within the present system. Prosecuting barristers often do not come to the cases until late in the process. We must do something about that. We must begin to put victims first in the criminal justice system, rather than treating them as an afterthought. We are not at that point yet.

3.25 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) on securing the debate today and on setting out so well many of the issues within the justice system. It has been an excellent debate, with a huge degree of consensus across the Chamber about the need to improve victims’ rights on a number of fronts, for a number of reasons. I wholeheartedly agree with the concern that many colleagues have raised about the victim contact scheme. That problem needs to be addressed as a priority.

I want to mention the speech by the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who highlighted the case of a friend who was the victim of domestic abuse for many years without realising it. Sadly, that situation is repeated often, the length and breadth of the country, and I look forward to the Government’s bringing forward a domestic abuse Bill shortly. That will be discussed at the meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on the white ribbon campaign at 4.45, later this afternoon.

No one ever imagines that they will be a victim of crime, and if, sadly, it happens, many will be unsure of the process involved, beyond phoning the police, and unsure of what their rights are as a victim. It will obviously be a traumatic experience, and not only is it important that we have an effective set of rights for victims of crime, but it is vital that those rights be clearly and sensitively communicated in the aftermath.
of crime. As the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), who is no longer in his place, said, too often victims are punished twice.

A recent Supreme Court ruling highlighted the way in which the system might fail victims. It stated that a police force breached the human rights of victims by failing to investigate complaints properly. That ruling has serious implications for the rights of victims. If police fail to investigate a serious violent crime effectively in the future, they could be sued under the Human Rights Act 1998.

High-profile recent cases have raised immediate concerns about victims’ rights. However, there has been concern for some time that victims may not be receiving the full breadth of support to which they should be entitled. As we have heard, in England and Wales the Victims’ Commissioner has highlighted problems with the complaints system, and inconsistency about allowing victims the right to make a victim personal statement. As the hon. Member for Leeds North West mentioned, Victim Support has also called for a new, clearly enforceable victims’ law, setting out eight proposals to strengthen the rights of victims. They include creating a single complaints system for victims, introducing a more powerful Victims’ Commissioner, providing greater protection and support to children who experience crime, and improving communication with victims about the outcomes of their case. I hope that, as the hon. Member for Leeds North West asked, the Minister will provide an update on the Government’s thinking on a victims’ law.

The rights of victims are currently set out in the code of practice for victims of crime and there is an explanation of what they should expect from the various bodies within the criminal justice system. Despite the fact that that charter is on the statute book, it seems that not all victims are being afforded those key entitlements. Failure to comply with the code of practice does not in itself make a person liable to criminal or civil proceedings. The Scottish Government take the protection and support of victims of crime seriously. The Scottish National party has long recognised the need to provide the right information and, crucially, the right support to those affected by crime. That plays a key part in a modern justice system that is fair, accessible, and efficient for everyone.

The Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014 introduced various measures to protect and enhance the rights of victims, and it focused on providing direct assistance and information to those who experience a crime. It included new rights for victims to access information about their case, and the publication of standards of services by justice organisations. The victims code for Scotland sets out the rights and entitlements that someone can expect. Those rights are statutory, and the code sets out the minimum standard of service that someone should expect, and explains how they will be treated by criminal justice organisations. The Scottish Government recently published “Guidance for the Delivery of Restorative Justice in Scotland”, which outlines the process that allows victims the opportunity to communicate the impact of crime on their lives, in the hope that they will regain some control.

We are debating the rights of victims but—with apologies, Mrs Main—there is one issue we have not mentioned: Brexit. Currently, the UK Government have signed up to the 2012 EU directive that deals with rights, support for and protection of victims of crime. The directive aims to ensure that a consistent level of legal and emotional support is offered to victims, helping them to be fully involved in criminal justice proceedings. Thus far, the Government have failed to provide assurances that those common standards of legal and practical support will continue post-Brexit, but the UK can act unilaterally and ensure that those rights continue. We do not want a diminution of standards in the protection offered to victims in England, Wales, or anywhere else in the UK. Will the Minister confirm whether the UK will continue to participate in the 2012 directive, or make arrangements to ensure that those rights continue?

Vicrims’ rights should be placed at the heart of any justice system that works for all, but we must do more to support them. The Government have a duty to ensure that victims are provided with the maximum level of support and help during that traumatic period. The various legal jurisdictions in the UK can be rightly proud of their judicial history—indeed, much of the legal world looks up to our systems. However, there are warning signs in England and Wales. A modern justice system relies on being fair and accessible to all, and that includes supporting victims, so that they can play their full part in the pursuit of justice. The UK Government must step up to the mark to ensure that they get it.

3.32 pm

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Main, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) on securing this debate. We have heard the varying experiences of victims of crime discussed from many different angles, but if I had to single out one contribution, I would say that the remarkable speech by the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) should not go unnoted.

All the speakers focused on one point: too often, victims are still the forgotten voice in the criminal justice system. We are rightly proud of checks and balances in our legal system that prevent innocent people from being convicted, but for the victim it can often feel as if their rights are an afterthought compared with the rights of the perpetrator. No victim of serious crime should ever feel that they are battling to be believed, yet that is still the experience of far too many people who have the courage to come forward. Victims often talk about feeling like an afterthought; they are not kept informed of key decisions about the case, or they are not given a sufficient explanation for why a case is not being taken forward. If they manage to get their case to court, the distress does not stop; instead, victims can face a repeat of the original trauma. They may be forced to face the perpetrator in court, and in some instances they are even cross-examined by them, reliving every detail of the crime. Victims do not want their rights to be put above those of the accused; they simply want fairness. Despite progress, our system is still re-victimising the vulnerable, and deterring victims from coming forward and seeking justice.

Now for the politics. The 2015 Conservative manifesto adopted the recommendations of Labour’s victims’ taskforce, and promised victims that a Conservative Government would deliver “a new Victims’ Law that will enshrine key rights for victims”
That was three years ago. In the 2015 Queen’s Speech, the Government again promised to introduce legislation, “putting the key entitlements of the Victims’ Code in primary legislation.”

Victims waited, but no legislation came. Twelve months later, in the next Queen’s Speech, there was no mention of a victims’ law—apparently that was no longer a priority for Government. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) tabled an amendment to the Policing and Crime Bill and sought to put the key elements of the victims code in law. Ministers blocked those amendments, promising instead to produce their own strategy for victims “within 12 months”. Well, it has now been 12 months, so last month I asked the Minister where the strategy was, and I was told that it would come “after Easter”. We now hear that it could be more like summer before any recommendations are published.

Victims have waited long enough. As other hon. Friends have asked, where is the victims’ law that was promised by the Conservative Government in 2015? Why has it taken three years? Victims who have been let down time and again by the system feel that they are being let down again by this delay.

In office, the Labour Government introduced the victims code, setting out for the first time the rights of victims within our criminal justice system. It is now time to provide that code with legal teeth. Labour is fully committed to introducing a stand-alone victims’ law that would put the key elements of the victims code into primary legislation. Will the Minister confirm the Government’s intentions? Are they still committed to introducing a stand-alone piece of legislation—a victims’ law? Without power to enforce the victims code in law, it is left to the police, prosecutors, courts, and parole boards to monitor how well they comply with the code.

The Government do not collect data on the experiences of victims in the criminal justice system, or on how the code is being implemented. Last month I asked the Minister how many breaches of the victims code there had been in the last four years, and I was told that that is not monitored. I asked how long it takes for victims to receive the compensation they have been awarded—Victim Support estimates that some £17.5 million in compensation was not paid within one year of a compensation order being made—and again I was told that the Government do not monitor that. I asked how many victims of domestic violence have been cross-examined in court by the perpetrator, and again the Minister responded that the Government do not hold such information. Ministers say that victims’ rights are a priority for them, but how can that be if the Government do not even know whether the victims code is being enforced?

Victim Support can provide some of the answers. It surveyed almost 400 victims and found that asking the criminal justice system to mark its own homework when upholding the victims code leads to victims being let down at each stage of the process. The research found that six in 10 victims surveyed did not receive their rights under the code. Does the Minister agree that it is time that that was effectively monitored and upheld? We cannot simply rely on victims being aware of their rights under the code. Does the Minister agree with the Victims’ Commissioner, Baroness Newlove, who recently said: “Why should victims always have to be fighting their corner? That’s why we need a victims’ law.”?

Time and time again victims speak of the importance of having their voice heard in the process, being able to address the court directly and to contribute to parole board decisions, but fewer than half of all eligible victims have opted in to the victim contact scheme that ensures that victims are kept up to date on their case and allows them to make statements before sentencing and parole. Presumably, many victims do not even know that such a scheme exists. More than half of victims surveyed by Victim Support were not offered the chance to make a victim personal statement.

The failure to inform the victims of John Worboys about the decision to release him on parole is the most recent and serious example of the way that victims’ views are neglected and ignored by our criminal justice system. It took a public outcry and the tenacity of the victims themselves to ensure that they were contacted for consultation on the terms of his release.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I ask the hon. Lady to be mindful that this is sub judice and any comments she may make must be carefully considered.

Gloria De Piero: Thank you, Mrs Main; I will do that.

Another key pillar of the victims code is the right to review a decision by the police or Crown Prosecution Service, such as a decision not to prosecute. I asked the Government what proportion of qualifying victims go as far as requesting a review of a decision, and I was told it happens in less than 2% of cases. Either 98% of victims are happy with decisions taken by police and prosecutors, or they are simply unaware of or unable to access that right. Last year the Government blocked Labour attempts to enshrine the right to a review in law, and to make it legally enforceable and monitored. Will the Minister confirm whether the long-awaited victims strategy will seek finally to place that right in law?

This issue does not matter only for victims. The experience of reporting a crime and going through the court process is actively deterring many people from coming forward or pursuing their case, and that is particularly serious for victims of sexual assault and domestic violence. Victims of sexual or domestic violence still lack the confidence to report an attack. They fear the ordeal that they might face in the courtroom, including coming face to face with their abuser and being forced to relive every detail of the ordeal in front of the courts, often cross-examined as if they were the one on trial. We therefore welcome the recent announcement of a consultation on the draft Domestic Abuse Bill and the Government’s consideration of extending to victims of domestic abuse special provisions, such as separate entrances and exits, screens and video links, which are currently available to victims of sexual violence. It is critical, however, that that is not only for the criminal courts; they must also be available in the family courts.

Last year, we uncovered figures showing that, since the Government’s cuts to legal aid, the number of victims of domestic violence representing themselves against their abusers in the family courts has more than doubled. Victims are facing the prospect not only of
having to represent themselves, but of being cross-examined by their abuser in court. Women’s Aid has found that more than half of the domestic abuse victims it surveyed had no access to special measures and more than a third were verbally or physically abused by their former partner in the family courts. Will the Minister confirm that the Government’s plans to extend special court provisions to victims of domestic abuse will extend to the family courts as well?

I will end with a quote from Claire Waxman, the new London Victims’ Commissioner appointed by London Mayor Sadiq Khan. She summed up her own experience of the criminal justice system, saying:

“I naively believed the system was there to help victims, instead it compounds their trauma. It placed the rights of my stalker above my rights to be protected”.

Such stories are all too familiar. It is time that the Government fulfilled their promise and gave us a victims’ law.

3.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. It has been a pleasure to hear all the contributions this afternoon, especially that of the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for securing this debate on the rights of victims of crime. It is particularly timely given the recent focus on such matters in a number of high-profile cases. I know through my own personal experience of meeting victims of crime, speaking with support organisations and meeting many of the hon. Members present, exactly how important such rights are in the lives of victims. I am therefore grateful for the opportunity to discuss them with you today.

Victims’ rights are now a fundamental part of our justice system, and ensuring that victims receive the rights they are entitled to is a priority for this Government. That is essential if we are to enable victims to cope with and recover from crime. We must also continue to drive improvement in the broader experience of victims, which involves ensuring that criminal justice agencies provide victims with a service appropriate to their needs and respectful of them as individuals. That also requires focus on the wider performance of agencies. Victims want cases to be well managed and dealt with swiftly. Beyond the criminal justice agencies, it is important that victim support services are in a position to offer victims the sorts of support they may need to aid their long-term recovery.

“Turning to the current framework of victims’ rights, we look first to the statutory victims code, which does two fundamentally important things. First, it sets out for victims exactly what they are entitled to receive from the criminal justice system. Secondly, it makes clear to the criminal justice agencies the services that they are expected to provide.

The Government want to make sure that the entitlements in the code keep pace with the changing needs of victims. After publicly consulting on the proposed changes, we revised the victims code in 2015. The revised code transposes part of the EU victims directive, which lays down the minimum standards of support that member states must provide to victims of crime.

The 2015 revision of the code broadened the definition of a victim so that victims of all criminal offences are entitled to receive support and information under the code. It also required relevant agencies outside the core criminal justice system that provide services to victims of crime to apply the victims code. Most crimes are dealt with by the police and Crown Prosecution Service, but there are other organisations with powers to investigate and prosecute. Finally, the revision entitled all victims who report a crime to receive a written acknowledgment, stating the basic elements of the criminal offence concerned.

As important as the code is, it will only deliver for victims if criminal justice agencies give effect to it on the ground. Victims’ rights must be a practical reality within the justice system, rather than just words on a page. This Government are committed to ensuring that the rights of victims are delivered throughout the criminal justice process. We have done that by improving the practical support on offer for vulnerable and intimidated victims of crime, such as protective screens in court and a video link, to ensure they are able to give evidence and to reduce the anxiety caused. We want to help victims provide evidence in a way that will prevent retraumatisation.

We are also determined to make the process of attending court less daunting for victims. We have established model waiting rooms at five sites in England and Wales, and are using them, and the results of a detailed audit of facilities for victims in all criminal courts, to provide the template for nationwide improvements.

More widely, we have radically transformed the way support services are delivered to victims to ensure that they reflect the needs of victims in local areas. Following consultation, the Government empowered police and crime commissioners to deliver services tailored to the needs of victims in their areas. We are allocating about £68 million to police and crime commissioners this year to provide emotional and practical support services for victims of crime.

Our enduring commitment to victims has seen the wider victim support services budget increase significantly, from around £50 million in 2012-13 to around £96 million in the current financial year. The direct benefit to victims of our support can be seen in the services now available for victims of sexual violence. Since 2010, central Government funding has enabled 15 new rape support centres to open. There are now 89 centres that the Government support directly. The centres provide counselling, support and advocacy to help victims—men and women, boys and girls—recover, as far as possible, from the effect of those terrible crimes. As part of the violence against women and girls 2020 strategy, we have made a commitment to maintain funding for rape support services at 2016-17 levels for the remainder of the spending review period.

We also know that when someone is the victim of, or bereaved by, the most traumatic crimes, they will need support from enhanced services. This year, we are providing just over £3 million to support families bereaved by murder or manslaughter. The Government have also provided specific funding to meet the needs of the victims of large-scale crimes, as we did following last year’s appalling attacks in Manchester and London.
Victims also have the right to apply for compensation under the criminal injuries compensation scheme if they are victims of violent crime. I sympathise deeply with anyone who has been caused injury by such a crime and we are determined to make sure that every victim gets the compensation to which they are entitled. To that end, in 2016-17, the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, which administers the scheme independently of Government, paid out around £143 million in compensation to victims of violent crime.

Despite all that has been achieved in recent years, we must never stop endeavouring to deliver support to victims more effectively. The challenge is ongoing—the needs of victims change over time, and crime itself evolves. As well as considering the development of victims’ entitlements, we need to ensure that agencies deliver those entitlements that are already in place. That is why we are exploring ways to strengthen victims’ rights through the victims strategy, which we will publish by the summer of 2018. It will consider how compliance with the entitlements in the victims code might be improved and better monitored.

We are also examining how criminal justice agencies responsible for delivery of entitlements might be better held to account. We are currently considering the legislative and non-legislative routes to delivering effective compliance for victims, and we are engaging widely as we develop the strategy, to make certain that the needs of victims are properly considered. As part of that work, we are exploring how victim support services can better reflect the changing nature of crime. Although the crime survey of England and Wales shows considerable falls in overall estimated crime, police recorded crime for violence against the person offences has increased 20%. For sexual offences, it has increased by 23%. Those figures give a valuable insight into the changing case load of the police. It is important that the services we provide reflect those changes, in order that the police are best able to help victims to cope and recover. We must keep the whole criminal justice process in mind, end to end. The issues raised in the Worboys case highlight that point. In the light of those issues, the Justice Secretary has ordered a review of parole processes, transparency and engagement with victims. A crucial part of that involves considering how we can better support and empower victims going through parole processes. We will bring forward proposals in that area shortly.

We are also looking to address the needs of victims who have to engage with other parts of the justice system. We accept that the family and civil courts can learn valuable lessons from the progress that has been made in criminal justice. We are working closely with senior judges and relevant agencies to consider how best to improve support and protections in other parts of the system. As recently as November 2017, new court rules were introduced requiring family courts to consider whether someone involved in proceedings is vulnerable, and if so, take steps to enable them to participate or give evidence.

Just last week, on International Women’s Day, the Government launched a consultation on domestic abuse. We want to hear people’s experiences to ensure that the system reflects victims’ needs. We hope to hear from a wide range of stakeholders, including survivors of domestic abuse and the organisations that support them. The consultation will shape our response to this terrible crime, which affects some 2 million victims each year. In addition to introducing a domestic violence and abuse Bill, we want to ensure a comprehensive response that not only involves all parts of Government, but builds on charities’ expertise. That is one reason why we have committed to invest a further £20 million in frontline groups.

We heard from a number of colleagues this afternoon, including my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friend the Member for Telford, the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), and the Opposition spokespeople, the hon. Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero). There were also interventions from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) and the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq).

The hon. Member for Leeds North West mentioned the victims of terrorism. The unit sits with the Home Office, but the funding sits with us—the complexity of the Government is always somewhat beyond me. The Government are committed to ensuring that victims of recent terrorist attacks receive the help and support they need. This year, we are providing £3.1 million for the homicide service, which supports those bereaved by murder or manslaughter, including terrorist attacks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay mentioned restorative justice, in which I am a strong believer. One of the reasons I am going to Brighton on Thursday afternoon is to support the work of the Restorative Justice Council. He also mentioned domestic abuse. As I said, dealing with domestic abuse is a key priority for the Government. I am very pleased that that and am proud to be playing my small part in it, not least because I have had a number of patients in the past who suffered from that dreadful crime.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle talked about victims of antisocial behaviour. I suspect that that issue blights every single constituency in the country. She also mentioned some awful cases of hate crime. I share her abhorrence of such crimes.

I am flattered that the Chair of the Justice Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, has joined us. He always makes fantastic contributions based on his deep knowledge of the area. He mentioned a series of issues—in particular the registered intermediaries scheme, which actually sits with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer). It is a vital part of supporting vulnerable victims and witnesses when they give evidence. We are currently recruiting more intermediaries, improving the training available to them and working closely with the police and prosecutors to ensure that witnesses are matched to an intermediary as swiftly as possible.

My hon. Friend also spoke about courts. He is aware of section 28 and our pre-trial evidence measures for vulnerable victims who do not want to go through the court process. He also mentioned restorative justice and
the need for a victims’ law. I hope I have assured him and others, including the hon. Member for Ashfield, about the victims’ law. There is no backtracking from our commitment. My understanding is that we will have some form of legislative underpinning of the victims code. The detail is yet to be fully worked through, but it will be in the strategy that will be published by the summer.

The hon. Member for Strangford spoke passionately—particularly about victims of terrorism. He always speaks well in such debates, sadly drawing on his recent experience of the troubles. He should be listened to carefully.

My hon. Friend the Member for Telford made a memorable speech. I think child sexual abuse is the worst of all crimes. Her sterling work and her obvious passion in that area is to be commended. In my nine-year tenure in university, one of my theses—I think it was in about 1992—was on the psychology of the child sex offender. I remember that in 1992 I was sceptical about the academic literature’s claims about the incidence of physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children in our society. Sadly, it turned out to be more accurate than I could ever have imagined. The independent inquiry on child sex abuse is now encountering the scale of the problem. The Government recognise that the inquiry is going to take a long time. If there are incidents where we can intervene to try to prevent sexual exploitation, we should. It is notable that two women made speeches on that issue, and the hon. Member for Rotherham made an intervention. Having strong women in this space is a good thing. We must empower women in the communities where sexual exploitation is taking place. If those women see strong women in action, they will step forward and offer the leadership that is desperately required.

The hon. Member for Rochdale is well-known to have deep experience of criminal justice, and I respect him for that. He mentioned restorative justice. I agree with him about the importance of high-quality training, which is why I am supporting the Restorative Justice Council as much as possible. He mentioned the failure of prosecution, which sits outside my brief, but his comments were well made.

Finally—I have managed to get to the end in the required time—I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North West for organising the debate and all hon. Members for their outstanding contributions. I hope we can work across the House and beyond as we continue our efforts to support the victims of crime.

3.57 pm

Alex Sobel: I thank all hon. Members who took part in the debate. There were many notable contributions. The hon. Members for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), and my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) all spoke about restorative justice. I thank the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst for asking for a statutory right to access restorative justice. That is hugely important, and I fully support that call. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) supported my call for a new victims’ law. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) asked for statutory youth provision. My hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) supported that proposal and is leading the fight for it.

I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan), who raised the issue of child sexual exploitation. She bravely raised publicly the particular issues in Telford. I support her call for an independent investigation inquiry into Telford. She is surely on the side of the righteous in taking that issue forward. The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), made some excellent points.

The need for a victims’ law is irrefutable. I was disappointed by the Minister’s response. He talked about physical measures, such as protective screens and video links, and £68 million of additional funding. They are welcome but not sufficient. We continually talk about a victims’ law but do not enact it, although it has been in two manifestos and the Queen’s Speech. Now is the time to move forward and set out the legislative underpinning we need for a victims’ law.

I was disappointed that the Minister did not seem to listen to the issues I raised about my constituent who, nine months since the Manchester bombing, still has not had support. The Minister suggested that that was perhaps partly due to the fact that the issue fell between the stools of two Departments. I hope those Departments get together to ensure that victims are supported.

Dr Lee: I will by all means write to the hon. Gentleman on that issue. I will be very happy to provide a response.

Alex Sobel: I thank the Minister. I surely will write to him on behalf of my constituent.

Let us move forward. Let us work together to try to get a victims’ law on the statute book.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the rights of victims of crime.
British Nationals Imprisoned Abroad

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

4 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered British nationals imprisoned abroad.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. In late January, I attended an event organised by the Redress Trust, the international human rights and anti-torture non-governmental organisation, and the all-party parliamentary human rights group to launch Redress’s new report, “Beyond Discretion: The Protection of British Nationals Abroad”. The report uses the NGO’s experience of working with British torture survivors and their families over the past 25 years when trying to get the help of the UK Government.

Under international law, through the Vienna convention on consular relations, to which the UK is a party, all states have a right to intervene on behalf of nationals abroad to ensure that their fundamental rights are respected. It is important to recognise that that is not the same as interfering in cases. Among other protections, the VCCR allows for the freedom of communication between consular officials and a detained person, as well as freedom of access to the detained through consular visits.

Every year, nearly 6,000 British nationals are arrested or detained abroad. Of those, more than 100 tell the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that they have been tortured or ill treated while abroad. In 2016, the latest year for which data is available, the FCO delivered assistance to 118 British nationals who alleged that they had been tortured. The total number who have been tortured is of course likely to be higher, as some might not be able to report such violations, or have the chance to. One such case is that of Jagtar Singh Johal.

In October 2017, Jagtar travelled to India to marry his fiancée. On 4 November, while out shopping, he was seized by plain-clothes officers, hooded and abducted. Following a brief court hearing, he was held incommunicado by Indian police for nine days at an undisclosed location, and he was denied all access to lawyers, British consular staff and family members. On 10 November, Jagtar was secretly presented in court while his lawyer and British consular staff were, outrageously, left outside the courtroom waiting to be called. They were informed along with the media only after he had been presented before the court and had left the courtroom. Subsequently, witnesses reported that Jagtar had great difficulty standing or walking and left the courtroom. Subsequently, witnesses reported that Jagtar had great difficulty standing or walking and left the courtroom. Subsequently, witnesses reported that Jagtar had great difficulty standing or walking and left the courtroom.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for bringing this short debate to the House. Is not the forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting here in London a prime opportunity for the Government to tackle the Indian Government head-on about the claims of torture of my constituent, Jagtar Singh Johal, while he was in early detention in India?

Preet Kaur Gill: Absolutely. That is a question I shall be posing to the Minister in my speech.

On 14 November, in the courtroom when Jagtar first met his lawyer, briefly, he made allegations of severe torture between 5 and 9 November. That included leg separation and electric shocks to his ears, nipples and genitals. He has told lawyers that police also forced him to sign blank pieces of paper, believed to be for the purpose of forging confessions.

On 16 November, after much lobbying, British consular staff were eventually able to meet Jagtar, some 12 days after his abduction, torture and interrogation, but two senior police officers remained in the interrogation room to prevent a private conversation. The experienced consular officer present assessed Jagtar and concluded that he was prevented from fully opening up about his mistreatment or to show signs of torture, and he was declared vulnerable.

To date, unacceptably, the Indian authorities have prevented Jagtar from having private access to British consular staff. Will the Minister please offer some explanation as to why the Indian authorities have done that? What actions has the FCO taken in the past 130 days to address such an unacceptable state of affairs?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this matter to Westminster Hall for consideration. I have been asked by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) to intervene on behalf of her constituent, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has been imprisoned in Iran for almost two years. We all know the story, which is clear, and she has been separated from her husband Richard, who lives in West Hampstead, and her daughter Gabriella, who lives with Nazanin’s parents in Tehran. That case should never be forgotten. It is important to renew our efforts to free her and bring her home—and to bring all the other people home as well.

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention on behalf of Nazanin, whose case has been in the public arena for some time. Her husband is present in the Public Gallery for this debate. I shall also touch on her case, which is also extremely important.

On 21 November, in response to a parliamentary question by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), the then FCO Minister, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), described Jagtar’s treatment as “unconstitutional” and warned of “extreme action” against the Indian authorities. For a large part of his detention, Jagtar has been in police as opposed to judicial custody. In police custody, apart from the severe-degree torture, he has been abused and mistreated. Sleep deprivation techniques, constant verbal abuse, solitary confinement, use of handcuffs 24 hours a day, and misinformation about his family and the British authorities have been used to exploit and demoralise Jagtar mentally.

In December 2017, Redress called on the UN special rapporteur on torture to intervene in Jagtar’s case, and on the Indian Government to ensure that he is protected from further torture. Redress also called for Jagtar to be provided with an immediate independent medical examination—which he has been denied, despite repeated requests by his lawyer—and for the allegations of torture to be investigated according to international law. The next hearing for such a medical will be held sometime in
March, almost four months after the alleged torture took place. Again, will the Minister please update us on the steps taken to secure an independent medical examination and any necessary medical treatment following the allegations of torture?

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I think the hon. Lady touched on this briefly, and might be about to do so in more detail, but does she agree with me and with Redress that if the Government provided a higher level of consular assistance, as well as some consistency and clarity about the circumstances in which they will provide it, that would help in the cases not only of those such as Nazanin and Jagtar, but those seriously injured abroad, which is another significant issue? For example, my constituent Robbie Hughes suffered a serious attack while abroad.

**Preet Kaur Gill**: We are signed up to the VCCR so, as the right hon. Gentleman was absolutely correct to say, we need to ensure that we use our position in the light of that to raise similar issues for injured individuals.

Jagtar’s case is extremely serious, but it has become farcical and a trial by media. He has been brought to court more than 30 times over the past four months, and he has been taken in and out of judicial and police custody. He is now being held in judicial custody until 3 April. I understand that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has expressed concerns in writing that confidential police investigation videos of Jagtar, taken when he was under duress, have inappropriately been released to Indian TV stations by the Indian authorities. Has the Foreign and Commonwealth Office complained to the Indian authorities about Jagtar facing trial by media, which means that, if charged, he would never get a fair trial?

The British High Commission has never been able to meet Jagtar in private. Requests for private access to him have been repeatedly denied. I will go into more detail about the importance of private visits by consular officials in cases such as Jagtar’s. The VCCR states that nationals should be “free to communicate” and have access to consular officers. In cases of torture, often the authorities will be present in the room or will find other ways of monitoring and controlling interactions between consular officers and the individual. The International Committee of the Red Cross, which conducts prison visits throughout the world to ensure humane treatment, recognises that private interviews are the only way to make it possible to hear an individual’s point of view. In addition, the United Nations Committee Against Torture has called on states to “insist on unrestricted consular access to its nationals who are in detention abroad, with facility for unmonitored meetings and, if required...appropriate medical expertise”.

In short, private visits are essential to ensure the safety of victims of torture.

Consular assistance is an important humanitarian safeguard and provides a crucial link with the outside world. Sometimes it is the only link. The UK has said that it is a priority to meet Jagtar in private, but it is unacceptable that after 130 days it has not been able to do so. I conclude my remarks about Jagtar, I ask the Minister whether the Foreign Secretary will meet Jagtar’s family, who are concerned about the priority being given to this case.

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to ask that the Foreign Secretary meet the family. I have had many constituents contact me about this case. They are deeply concerned, because many of them visit India and they want to make sure that the proper protections are available. It would be appropriate for the Government to give higher priority to this case.

**Preet Kaur Gill**: As my hon. Friend suggests, lots of individuals have approached many Members, from all parts of the House, stating that they are very concerned about visiting India, given what has happened in Jagtar Singh Johal’s case. I therefore ask the Minister whether the Prime Minister will raise Jagtar’s case with Narendra Modi when she meets him next month in London, given that she spoke to the BBC and showed interest in Jagtar’s case within days of his abduction and torture.

On a broader level, I would like the Minister to give an update on the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Once again, Nazanin has had no access to consular services. She was placed in solitary confinement for eight and a half months in a cell measuring just 1.5 by 2 square metres and has been subjected to mental and psychological pressure, with the intention of demoralising her and putting her in a completely powerless situation. She has faced prosecution for the charges levied against her in a secret and unfair trial. Her treatment has had a severe impact on her mental and physical health. As hopes for her release were dashed over Christmas, what action are the UK Government taking to ensure that she is protected from any further torture and ill treatment, and that she is released as soon as possible?

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. On the point about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, does she agree that we need to review the support given to dual nationals to ensure that we offer them protection when travelling to hostile states?

**Preet Kaur Gill**: My hon. Friend raises a very important point about dual nationals and making sure that they have the rights they are entitled to. In Nazanin’s case, she should have had access to British consular services.

Finally, I would like to raise the case of Andy Tsege, a British national who has been arbitrarily detained in Ethiopia since 2014, when he was kidnapped and rendered to Ethiopia on the command of the Ethiopian Government, as part of a brutal crackdown on political opponents and civil rights activists. After being kidnapped, Andy was held in secret detention in solitary confinement for more than a year. He has been paraded on Ethiopian TV looking ill and gaunt. Andy is held under a sentence of death that was handed down in absentia while he was living in London, in a trial that was lacking basic elements of due process. He has no contact with his family in London, despite promises from the Foreign Secretary over a year ago to facilitate a family visit, and he is not receiving appropriate medical care.

These three individuals represent just a fraction of the number of British nationals imprisoned abroad. Although I do not call for the Government of this country to interfere in the internal affairs of another sovereign state, or proclaim that due process should not be followed, we cannot sit idly by while British citizens are deprived of some of the most basic rights that we
Mr Johal’s legal representative called for an independent medical report to ascertain his client’s claims of torture, but that request has been denied. Although consular services have been provided to Mr Johal by the British Deputy High Commissioner in Chandigarh, allegedly all visits have been supervised by the Indian prison authorities and none has been held in private. That example highlights the continued failures by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in handling Mr Johal’s case and raising the important issues of his welfare with the relevant authorities. The UK Government’s failure to condemn the series of abuses has left all British citizens travelling abroad vulnerable. I implore the Minister to act now and press for further access to Mr Johal so he can receive the necessary support that he is entitled to as a British citizen.

4.17 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) on securing this important debate, ably supported by the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). The Minister for Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), had hoped to take part in this debate as she is the Minister with departmental responsibility for this area, but at this very moment she is appearing before the Foreign Affairs Committee. It is therefore my pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government.

I will set out some general consular policy before moving on to the detention policy and the individual cases raised. I also undertake to write to hon. Members with more details where that is appropriate. The Government are proud to uphold a long tradition of offering British nationals a comprehensive, responsive consular service. Consular assistance is central to our work at the FCO. This support is not a right, I hasten to add, nor is it an obligation. Contrary to a common misconception, the Government do not have a legal duty of care to British nationals abroad. When things go wrong, our consular staff endeavour to give advice and practical support to British nationals overseas and their families in the UK, 24 hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year. We aim to provide support and guidance tailored to the specific context of each case. As would be expected, our staff provide professional, non-judgmental, polite and helpful support where possible.

The volume, variety and complexity of the cases we deal with is staggering. In the last financial year alone our staff overseas dealt with approximately 5,000 detentions, 3,600 deaths and nearly 3,500 hospital cases. Naturally, our support is not without certain reasonable limitations. Rightly, the FCO expects and advises individuals to take sensible steps before they travel.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: I will not, because I have very little time to make the speech I want to make.

UK nationals travelling abroad should ensure that they have sufficient travel insurance and read the FCO’s travel advice so that they can make informed decisions about the obvious risks in certain parts of the world. We offer help appropriate to the circumstances of each case. Our overseas staff assess individuals’ vulnerability and needs based on who they are, where they are and...
the situation they face. Dual nationality was mentioned; I will endeavour to ensure that there is a review of precisely what impact that has and revert to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston.

We work particularly hard to support those who are most in need of our help, and we intervene on behalf of families if British nationals are not treated in line with most in need of our help, and we intervene on behalf of Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston.

I will endevour to ensure that there is a review of precisely what impact that has and revert to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Our understanding is that the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, will come to that conference. Will the Prime Minister raise this issue directly with him, and will the Foreign Secretary raise it with his counterpart from India?

Mark Field: I will try to ensure that that is done. The right hon. Gentleman will be well aware that these things rightly often have to be done on a private basis rather than through megaphone diplomacy.

Mr Johal’s case is well known to me and to senior colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Our staff have been working hard to provide assistance to Mr Johal and his family in the UK ever since his arrest in India in November 2017. I have met Mr Johal’s brother twice in the past six months, along with the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire. Since Mr Johal’s arrest, consular staff have visited him fortnightly. The Foreign Secretary spoke to his Indian counterpart about his case in November, and I raised it with the Indian Minister of State for Home Affairs on 1 January. Furthermore, various officials in our high commission have continued to raise concerns at the highest level. As Members pointed out, there are major concerns. Our high commissioner spoke to the Indian Foreign Secretary as recently as 7 March, and the basis of that conversation was relayed to the hon. Gentleman this morning.

I assure the House that we shall continue to raise this case at senior levels with the Indian authorities until the serious allegations raised by Mr Johal have been properly investigated. I recognise that this is a desperately difficult and distressing time for Mr Johal, his family and many in the UK Sikh community. I assure all hon. Members that his case remains a priority for me personally, and we shall continue to raise it with the Indian authorities as necessary.

Let me touch briefly on the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I recognise that her husband is here today. We shall continue to approach that case in the way that we judge is most likely to secure the outcome that we all want—in other words, her release. I hope the House will understand that I am not in a position to provide a running commentary on each and every development in Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s case, save that I believe there needs to be a review of what happens in relation to dual
nationals. I am not convinced that anything untoward necessarily happened here, but we need to try to review that issue.

I am unaware of the facts of the case of Mr Tsege, the British national in an Ethiopian jail to whom the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston referred, so I hope she will forgive me if I say I will write to her with full details of the issues she raised.

Understandably, much of this debate has related to Mr Johal. It is important to put on the record that India, as a partner in the Commonwealth and in many other ways, has a strong democratic framework that is designed to guarantee human rights. However, it also faces numerous challenges relating to its size and development, and when it comes to enforcing fundamental rights enshrined in its constitution and wider law, not least given the power of its states. Members are absolutely right to raise concerns about human rights in India in this forum and, as I said, I am happy for them to do so via correspondence. Because we share those real concerns, the UK Government are working alongside the Indian Government to build capacity and share expertise on the promotion and protection of human rights. I hope Members will understand that that is sometimes best done quietly and privately rather than through public pronouncements.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston once again for her contribution.

Graham P. Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: No.

I take this opportunity to thank the families and friends of British nationals detained overseas for working with us to support their loved ones through the most distressing situations. I also thank our consular officers, who at times work under great stress, for the support they provide British nationals during their most difficult times. The support by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for British nationals in difficulty abroad is and will continue to be an absolute priority.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Would those who are not staying for the next debate, which is an important debate about the contribution to society of social workers, please be kind enough to leave the Chamber quickly, quietly and without conversation?

4.29 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution to society of social workers.

It is an honour to serve under you, Mr Hollobone, and a real pleasure for me to call this debate in Westminster Hall. I would like to record for Hansard that the room is heaving and that the Public Gallery is packed, with standing room only. Alas, I cannot, because there is an important debate on statutory instruments on the Floor of the House. A number of colleagues from both sides of the House would have wanted to be here, were that not happening.

This subject has been close to my heart for the better part of a decade. I came across the extraordinary work that social workers do on first coming to work in Parliament, about a decade ago. I confess that until then I had been largely sheltered from the world in which they work, and indeed from the people they help. In the intervening 10 years I have never ceased to be amazed by their extraordinary passion, professionalism, stamina and commitment to helping people in some of the most difficult situations in which any citizens in our country find themselves. In the words of one social worker I was speaking to the other day, it is “a bloody hard job, but it’s bloody rewarding.”

I have been lucky in my career because I have had the opportunity to visit about 50 local authorities in the past 10 years, and everywhere I have gone I have seen great innovation and determination to help improve the lives of the most unfortunate.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I have dealt with social workers for a number of years and I agree that often they are undervalued and that when something goes wrong, they carry the blame. We often wonder why they do it, given the circumstances they find themselves in, with particularly difficult families, to say the least. They also see many things such as child abuse and pensioner abuse, for which they are on the frontline. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that society should do more to show that we value their contribution?

Alex Burghart: I completely agree; the hon. Gentleman makes his point powerfully. I have come to see social workers as the fifth emergency service, although I got in trouble for saying that many years ago—I got an angry letter from the coastguard—so I have ceased to say that. Social workers are one of our emergency services, but unlike the others, the majority of people never come into contact with them, and most people do not even know someone who has. It is therefore easy for misconceptions to grow about their role in society, the job they do and the way in which they do it. Part of the importance of this debate is to recognise the true nature of their job.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I know he has a deep interest in and a real passion for social work, and children’s services in particular. Has he seen Unison’s briefing for the debate? It tells us that half of social workers feel that their case load is over the limit, and
they blame staff shortages for that. Also, 60% say that Government cuts affect their ability to best support vulnerable people, and most work for free for 10 hours a week. Does he agree not only that we need to train and recruit more social workers into the system, but that we need the cash to support and pay them, and that we should reward them individually with a good pay rise?

**Alex Burghart:** I was grateful to Unison and the British Association of Social Workers for the briefings they sent me in advance of the debate. I understand that the survey reported in the Unison briefing represents some challenges for the profession and its working environment. I will always be looking to Government to provide more resources for vulnerable people. I would say on behalf of the Government—although I am sure the Minister can defend the Government perfectly well without me—that, according to the Library, since 2014-15 the money that has gone into children’s social work has gone up by 2% in real terms. We can always look for more, but I am glad that it is moving in the right direction.

**Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP):** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I had not intended to be here but I found myself with a little extra time, so I am glad to contribute. As he rightly said, many people do not come into contact with social workers, but I grew up with a mother who was a social worker in Muirhouse in Edinburgh—some may know it. Social workers—unless we already have one that I am aware of—are very much so. Part of the work that we do in our daily lives and in our jobs.

**Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con):** On that point, I do not think we have a social worker there, but, as patron of the Social Worker of the Year awards, I inform the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) that this coming Thursday there will be a reception on the Terrace for all the winners, and she is more than welcome to come along, meet them and pay her tribute in person.

**Alex Burghart:** Unbeknown to us, national social worker day is later this week—what we have achieved in the debate already! Most of my remarks will be confined to children’s social work as it is the area that I know best. That is in no way to denigrate the extraordinary work that adult social workers do. Indeed, on Friday I was with some of the adult social workers in Essex, who were absolutely impressive in their determination to make things better for local people. They were full of new ideas—they have developed an interesting new programme to support newly qualified social workers, which has seen recruitment increase substantially—and I am pleased to know that vulnerable adults and elderly people in my constituency can rely on them.

As I said, I came to this subject relatively recently in my career, and I did so by accident. I had started out working on education, and through good fortune and strange circumstances I ended up working for my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who has graced us with his presence. That was back in 2008, and at that time social workers were in particularly difficult circumstances. Their public reputation had taken a hammering following the Victoria Climbié case and soon after I started that job the awful case of Peter Connelly—Baby P—broke in the newspapers. Very unfairly, for a while social workers alone took the blame for the mistakes made in those cases. It was symptomatic of a society and a news environment that did not understand child protection in the round and was searching for the easiest scapegoats.

By the time I joined my hon. Friend—my then boss—he had already written what turned out to be a seminal paper, called “No More Blame Game,” which sought to set aside the myths that had grown up in the public imagination and to give social workers the respect, training, resources and professional autonomy they needed to do their job properly. It was my great pleasure to work alongside him and at the Department for Education in those next few years to see that programme bear fruit. The most substantial part of it was the Munro review of child protection, which was launched in 2010 and reported in 2011. It intended to put a renewed focus on frontline social work—not on national statutory guidance or defensive systems designed to protect organisations from reputational damage, but on the frontline experience of the children being helped by a professional social work body.

**Mr Jim Cunningham:** One of the difficulties that social workers have is that they must deal with different agencies and sometimes get the agreement of different agencies, certainly when they are dealing with child abuse. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with that?

**Alex Burghart:** Very much so. Part of the work that was pioneered by a number of local authorities and pushed by central Government around 2010 was a multi-agency approach. It is now very common in local authorities to see experienced social workers in an office alongside representatives from the local police force, local mental health services and a range of local agencies, so they can have those professional conversations and should not get tied up in a bureaucratic process where people push a difficult case off their desk into somebody else’s hands and hope it goes away.

**Mr Jim Cunningham:** The blame game.

**Alex Burghart:** Indeed. Instead of building a system that could, at its worst extent, be one of professional buck-passing, we have seen the development of collaborative working in the truest sense. Where that has happened, we know that vulnerable people and their families are most likely to be getting the support they need.

During the course of our work in those days, we came across a number of obstinate problems that were holding professional social workers back. Anybody working in social work at the time will remember the integrated children’s system, ICS, which was an extremely well-intentioned central Government computer system, designed to capture data and help social workers to analyse it.
The only problem was that it had not been designed in consultation with social workers; it had been designed by IT folk with other interests.

I remember—I shall never forget—sitting in an office with about 20 social workers one day and hearing with complete incredulity that it took them eight hours to fill out the form for one visit. The visit with a child and a family might have lasted 45 minutes, but it took eight hours to do the paperwork for it. The enormous burden that that placed on the social work community was incapacitating. We met social workers who were taking time off work in order to do their work. They were taking holiday so that they could get the time to fulfil their paperwork as the system required them to.

Alex Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the necessity of consulting with professional social workers. Another area that the National Association of Social Workers talks about is the current adoptions system and the acceleration to get children adopted as quickly as possible. The NASW has some real concerns that the system, because it is accelerated, might not be looking after the best interests of the children. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that we need to listen more to social workers, particularly their concerns about adoption and the system currently in place, so that we can ensure that children get the best outcome?

Alex Burghart: The Munro review of child protection emphasised very strongly the need for a systems learning model. That means that everyone who is involved in the child protection system and in looking after vulnerable children must be able to voice their concerns and opinions and have a fair hearing. It is only by listening to different people operating in different parts of the system that we can get the most effective working of that system. For a long time, certainly on the ground in many local authorities, social workers felt that their opinions were not being heard by senior management, that senior management—particularly some directors of children’s services way back in the day—were entirely unconnected to the vulnerable population they were supposed to be serving.

We saw children’s services departments that were almost solely focused on education and saw the vulnerable children as an add-on—a small part of their business. We also met directors of children’s services who took the time to go out and go bowling with all their children in foster care, to hear their views. We have to remember that children themselves are part of the system, and it is through hearing their voices, and their views of the services and support they and their parents are receiving, that we can make the improvements that are so necessary.

We often talk, quite rightly, about a child-centred, or child and family-centred, system, but often, with those most vulnerable families, the only way of getting to that centre is to have professional social workers or teachers working alongside them in schools. More recently, since the Munro review reported in 2011, some fantastic additional changes have been brought in by the Department for Education.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. We should pay a little bit of tribute to the previous Minister, Mr Timpson, the former Member for Crewe and Nantwich, who lost his seat. About four or five years ago I did a lot of work with him, because he was looking at the issues not only at local authority but at regional level. He did a lot of good work because he understood the problem, and I was very impressed by him. We should give him a little bit of credit here.

Alex Burghart: Absolutely; Edward Timpson was an excellent Children’s Minister. He had a lot of respect in the sector, and rightly so. He came from a family that had first-hand experience of fostering, and he brought a huge wealth of real-life experience to his role. It is good to hear that he was respected on both sides of the House.

One of the things brought in at DFE after 2010, as I was saying, was the innovation programme, which again gave local social workers, local authorities and people working on the ground with children and families the opportunity to come up with new ideas and bid for Government money in order to prove their model. It is good to see that fund rolling on; I think only last year the Government committed a further £36 million to the initiative, which has been warmly welcomed by local authorities and social workers across the country.

At the moment the Department is putting into practice the contents of its strategy paper, “Putting Children First”—an enormous programme of social worker development, from recruitment all the way through to ensuring that more experienced social workers are up to speed with the latest techniques and theories, and that the social work community is talking to itself and learning from itself. It is a really valuable programme, which will help to upgrade the profession in the most constructive and productive way possible.

Things are tough in some local authorities; I spend enough time talking to people in children’s services to know that that is true. I also know that, even where things are financially tight, there is still great appetite for innovation and people are finding new ways of working and of helping children and families. I was talking to some social workers on Friday who had found that, simply by putting in a new package of support for newly qualified social workers, they were getting more young recruits through the door and building a vibrant, young, energetic team.

I have also been lucky enough to see how the Government’s great troubled families programme has been integrated into the main body of social work practice in some outstanding local authorities, where we have seen the development of a continuum of care, going from children’s centres open to all at one end, all the way through to the most severe child protection cases, with the troubled families programme helping those in the middle. That is the group I will talk about as I bring my remarks to a close.

One group that has been neglected in public discourse until this point is children in need—children who are not fully in care but on the edge of care; who are on social services’ radar but who do not receive all the services that somebody who is fostered or has been adopted might. It is a large group: there are about 400,000 children in need at any one time, and during the course of a year about 750,000 children are in need. Their outcomes are terrible, and are often worse than those we see for the looked-after population, as we
might expect, because these are the children who are left at home in disrupted, complex families, whereas their contemporaries who have been taken into care will have, if they are lucky, the stability of long-term fostering or an adoptive placement and will see their outcomes improve.

It is extremely important that we turn our attention to that group. I believe that, as a result of our bringing our social work profession into the 21st century and helping it to develop, social workers will have the skills, the appetite and the determination to help those people. I am delighted that the Department for Education is undertaking a review of the outcomes of children in need, as we announced in the Conservative party’s general election manifesto last year.

Alex Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman is making a strong case for working with even more children, but that actually requires more people as well. I know he is impressed by the increase in money that the Government are putting in, and local authorities are also raising more, through council tax. However, does he agree that, in order to achieve the things that he wants, we need in the system more social workers with smaller workloads?

Alex Burghart: I certainly see the case that the hon. Gentleman makes. The point I was making, which is not completely dissimilar, is that the troubled families programme brings with it a large budget. I have been pleased to observe over the past few years that the proportion of families on the troubled families programme with a child in need has risen and risen, as more local authorities take that budget and apply it to those families who need it most. We have a much more responsive and particular system now than a few years ago.

We all aspire to having the most professional, best informed, most inspired and inspiration social workers anywhere in the world. I believe that we are heading in that direction, but it is not something that can be achieved overnight and it is not something that can be taken for granted. However, I am sure we all agree that, without the contribution that England’s social workers make to vulnerable children and families, the world would be a considerably worse place.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I am obliged to call the first of the Front-Bench spokespersons at 5.7 pm. The guideline limits are 10 minutes for the Scottish National party spokesperson, 10 minutes for Her Majesty’s official Opposition’s spokesperson and 10 minutes for the Minister. I will invite the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) to sum up the debate after the Minister has concluded his remarks. Until 5.7 pm, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) has the Floor.

4.53 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I had not intended to speak, but such has been the eloquence of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) that I feel impelled to complement his wise words. I first declare my interest in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, and I repeat my interest as a patron of the Social Worker of the Year awards, as is the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck).

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on what is an unfashionable subject that we hear little of—no, I am sorry, he mentioned that there is a problem in this place—that has been a problem for many years. Not only was he well schooled when he arrived here 10 years ago, but his experience then included, as he has mentioned, his time working as an essential part of the Munro review, before moving on to Barnardo’s and then becoming the deputy Children’s Commissioner. He has vast experience, which he has already brought to bear in his short time in this place. I am glad that he has done so again today.

My hon. Friend mentioned social workers as the fifth emergency service. We used to refer to them as the fourth emergency service—we do not want to downplay them. Their difference from the other emergency services is that they are damned if they do and damned if they don’t. Too often, they are subject to tabloid newspaper headlines that complain if they have the temerity to step in and take a child into care, particularly if the child is from a middle-class family who one would not expect to face action. They are damned if they do not step in early enough and take a child into care who subsequently becomes a Baby P, a Victoria Climbié or one of the many other high-profile cases, which are just the tip of the iceberg.

I am sure the Minister sees this now, but in my previous role as Children’s Minister, the most depressing start to the week was going through an audit of the new cases of severe child abuse and child fatalities that had come in during the previous week and what progress they had made in the courts or whatever. I am afraid that the cases we saw in the headlines were just a fraction of what was going on, day in, day out. I think the situation is better, but there are still, and always will be, people who do terrible things to vulnerable children. Too often, it is only social workers who stand between those people and the welfare—indeed, the lives—of those children.

I am glad that my hon. Friend mentioned “No More Blame Game”, which was a really important piece of work back in 2007, before the whole Baby P issue blew up. It was all about trusting social workers, rather than just pointing the finger of blame, as I am afraid had been the default position of too many people in positions of responsibility. Time and again, I found myself reminding people, during media interviews and elsewhere, that it was not the social worker who killed that child. It was the parents, carers or others close to that child who actually did the damage. The social workers desperately tried to avoid that.

The job of the social worker is to try to detect early where a child is vulnerable and to try to make a judgment about an appropriate intervention. It is not a science. That is why one of my big mantras regarding social workers was that I wanted to give them the power and the confidence to make a mistake. There had been numerous child protection Bills since the Victoria Climbié case, and all were exceedingly well-intentioned, but their net result was to add to the rulebook—to add more regulations. By 2010, the “Working Together” manual ran to something like 760 pages.

Unison revealed that social workers were spending more than 80% of their time in front of computers filling in process forms, rather than spending time face-to-face with those children. The net result was that they were constantly ticking boxes to comply with the rules,
rather than using their gut instinct, their judgment and their training and professionalism to say, “Something isn’t quite right here. I’m going to step in and do something.” Occasionally, they will be wrong—as I say, it is not a science—but usually the decent social workers, as the vast majority are, will be right to do so. However, they lacked the confidence to step in because it was all about following the rulebook and ticking the boxes.

That was a huge problem with the profession that caused them to lose confidence in doing the professional job that we wanted them to do.

Our review back in 2007 was an important start in saying that we need to trust social workers. We first flagged up the need to have a chief social worker to give the whole profession gravitas—a public face; somebody who was trusted—and to make sure that social worker training was integrated with other training as well. Some of the best safeguarding I have seen is when a social worker is sat next to a police officer, in the same room, being taught from the same manual. Hot-desking is now often the favoured way forward in children’s rooms, being taught from the same manual. Hot-desking teacher, who is sat next to a police officer, in the same social worker is sat next to a GP, who is sat next to a nurse who was trusted—and to make sure that social worker training was integrated with other training as well. Some of the best safeguarding I have seen is when a social worker is sat next to a GP, who is sat next to a teacher, who is sat next to a police officer, in the same room, being taught from the same manual. Hot-desking is now often the favoured way forward in children’s rooms, and other multi-agency safeguarding hubs, which is absolutely right.

The Munro review was important. It was the first Department for Education review launched by the new Government in 2010. It was nothing to do with education: it was actually all about child protection and social work, which was not a fashionable subject in those days. The Munro review—Eileen Munro’s work was outstanding and respected. I think on all sides politically, and certainly throughout the profession—was all about how we peeled back some of the rules that were standing in the way of allowing social workers to get on with their job and use their professionalism and instincts to make the right judgments. It was a really important review.

My hon. Friend referred to children in need. It has been estimated that the cost of child neglect each and every year in this country is some £15 billion. That is £15 billion for not getting things right. Just think what we could achieve if a fraction of that were spent on prevention and ensuring that neglect became a thing of the past, or certainly a much more minority occupation. The Munro report was therefore very important.

The rewriting of the “Working Together” document, which was slimmed down from more than 750 pages to below 100, was also very important, because it set out the basic principles and then said to the social worker, “That is what you need to achieve. Now go out and do it. Use your professional talents to decide how you execute it in individual cases and, above all, spend time snooping around. Go into people’s homes. See people face to face. Eyeball those whom you suspect may be up to no good. Speak to the children—get the child’s voice and the child’s view on this.” That was so important.

It is also important that politicians and civil servants should have experience of that. I spent a year back in 2011 being a social worker in Stockport. I was going out on cases with real social workers—and gosh, they took me to some of their most challenging cases to see it like it is. My hon. Friend mentioned the former director of children’s services in Harrow, one of the most outstanding directors of children’s services that we had, who each week would take a group of children in the care of Harrow Borough out bowling and engage with them and hear from them exactly what was going on. In the Department for Education, we set up four panels of children: one of foster-children, one of children in residential homes, one of recent care leavers and one of children who had been adopted. They came along and told us, without the carers, managers and officials there, what was actually going on. That is where I learnt some of my best information, as I did by going out with social workers on patrol, without directors and managers—themselves bosses. That is very important. I think and hope that in that time we re-established some of the credentials and confidence in social workers.

Alas, there is still a lot to do. Money has been protected for child safeguarding, but clearly, financial pressures are considerable at the moment. The number of children coming into the care system has continued to rise. That may be a good thing. I do not know whether we are taking too many or too few children into care. What I am concerned about is that we are taking the right children into care, at the right time, and looking after them properly once they are in the care of the state.

Alex Cunningham: I have a friend who has a leading role on a safeguarding board. She tells me that the workload has increased, particularly as there have been more case reviews and, because more children have been dying, there have had to be specific inquiries. The work is tremendously resource-intensive. Is the hon. Gentleman convinced that there are sufficient resources for people to do that work effectively?

Tim Loughton: There will never be enough resources for social work, as with so many things. Adult social care also faces serious challenges.

Alex Cunningham: Priorities.

Tim Loughton: It is a question of priorities and of intervening at the appropriate time; that is why I was a big fan of the early intervention fund, which was set up in the Department for Education. However, getting things wrong is the most costly outcome of the lot, and previously an awful lot of money was being wasted on the system and constraining social workers, rather than letting them get on with their job. The consequence was huge vacancy rates, too many locums filling the places and a lack of continuity, and the cost was that much more. The most costly thing of all was when things went really wrong, as they did with Baby P, Victoria Climbie and the other high-profile cases. The cost of putting that right was considerable, so it is a false economy not to be doing the things to which we have referred.

The all-party parliamentary group for children, which I have the privilege to co-chair, produced a report on the state of children’s social care last year, and we are doing an update on that. What it showed, above everything, was huge disparities between outcomes and experiences in different parts of the country. For example, a child in Blackpool has a 166-in-10,000 chance of being in the care system, while an equivalent child in Richmond in London has only a 30-in-10,000 chance. Richmond and Blackpool are very different places, but are they so different that more children get taken into care? We found huge differentials around the country on a whole range of thresholds, and we desperately need to learn from that. We need to learn from social workers why those different experiences and outcomes are happening.
At the end of the day, I found that those of our failing children’s services departments—we have a large number in special measures at the moment—that were turned around most effectively were not those with some new structure, process, trust or whatever imposed on them, but those where an inspirational leader, director of children’s services, went in and trusted his or her staff. And ultimately, many of the successful, recovering children’s services authorities came through with the majority of the social workers they had started with.

I remember that one director of children’s services who gave evidence to our inquiry said that he went into the county, got his social workers together and said to them, “Name all your cases.” When it got up to about 15 or 16, they could not remember the others, so he said, “Well, that’s probably about the case load you should have, isn’t it?” and that was what he put into effect. It is now one of the best-performing—I will not name it—children’s services departments in the country and is spreading that good practice to other counties and authorities around the country.

It is not rocket science, but it would be much more difficult without the dedicated social workers whom we have in this country. We do not value them enough. I think we value them more than we did—which is why it is essential, when we have opportunities such as this, that we say thank you to social workers for the outstanding job they do despite all the challenges they face every day.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): If the Minister starts his remarks at 5.17 pm and I split the time between now and then, that gives both Opposition spokespeople five minutes each. I will set the clock to assist them to achieve that task.

5.6 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) for securing the debate and for his summary of the subject. I agree with him that we have to learn from people with experience. My constituency is fairly typical of the demographic challenges faced across many parts of the country. That means that the role of social workers becomes ever more important in supporting people living with dementia and their family carers. When family carers, who are often advanced in years themselves, become ill, it is often to the social work service that they turn.

The recent bad weather—two weeks ago—brought knee-deep snow across my local area. I am aware of social workers going on foot from their own home to the homes of service users living in their neighbourhoods, and providing help with personal care when the social care providers were unable to get through the snow. I am aware of staff from children’s services in the Falkirk Council area, for example, staying on for double shifts and staying overnight at colleagues’ homes to ensure that they were ready and able to be back in work the next day. As a result, all the children and young people were cared for by a consistent residential care staff, despite the snow and freezing conditions. I am grateful for their efforts and commitment to the role.

Similar examples occurred in the West Lothian Council area, where staff went above and beyond to ensure that residents who rely on them for care were supported during the bad weather. Staff turned up for shifts when not scheduled to work, to ensure care could still be provided if colleagues were unable to come in due to the conditions, and helped out in other areas. To give just one positive example, a member of staff who went to pick up a prescription for a service user was told by the chemist of another vulnerable person unable to collect prescriptions, and delivered the lot. That kind of commitment above and beyond is often overlooked.

I take this opportunity to publicly put on record my thanks to all who helped out during those difficult days a few weeks ago, but social workers play a vital—sometimes thankless—role throughout the year. The recent inclement weather conditions simply helped to highlight how essential that role has been to members of our community.

In conclusion, social workers are highly qualified and professional individuals, who contribute greatly to our society and to the protection of our most vulnerable citizens. We must therefore ensure that they are not working under undue strain, and that they are adequately resourced to support the public services and meet the demands we place upon them.
Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) for securing this important debate ahead of next week’s World Social Work Day.

There is a general misunderstanding of what social workers do. As a result, they are often treated with suspicion by not only the general public, but many politicians in this place. True to type, when something is not understood by politicians, they seek to over-regulate and control it. This Government are treading that path too.

There are over 114,000 social workers in the UK. Before becoming a Member of Parliament, I was proud to be one of them, working in the field of child protection. Each of those social workers works a demanding week of approximately 46 hours in a physically, emotionally and mentally demanding job. I recall being regularly assaulted, punched, spat at, needing security escort and being held in victim support. It is therefore vital that the Government support and value the profession, but they do not.

The problems social workers face are not of their own doing or by their own design. Many people in the profession tell me that things are not getting better; things are getting worse. That should be no surprise to anyone following what the Government are doing to services and the most vulnerable in our country. Sure Starts and early years services have been decimated. We have heard a lot today about the Munro review. It is a real shame that the Government did not implement her suggested legal duty to provide early intervention services. Labour Members understand that that is vital; it is a shame the Government do not.

Disability benefits have been slashed. Public sector job losses have occurred on a massive scale. We have record levels of in-work poverty. Support and advice services are shutting. Mental health services have been stripped to the bone. Our NHS is creaking at the seams and our adult social care system is broken.

Alex Cunningham: My local authority, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, has suffered a 52% cut since 2010. It now spends 57% of the money it has on social care. Is my hon. Friend aware of this happening elsewhere in the country, and does she wonder, like I do, how councils are managing to deliver what they do deliver?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: My hon. Friend is spot on: this is happening in other councils right across the country; it is not confined to his own. In fact, there is a reported funding gap of £2.5 billion by 2020, with more than 400,000 people no longer able to access social care.

Children’s services are grappling with the highest numbers of children in care since the 1980s and facing a funding gap of £2 billion by 2020, as referral rates continue to rise at a staggering pace. The fact is, social work simply cannot be separated from the wider environment. Social work is interlinked with wider societal and economic issues. If one part of the system is depleted, the other is depleted, and it is social work clients who suffer.

Social workers know that all too well, because they see it every single day. Entering their eighth year of a pay freeze, 60% of social workers have stated that they feel Government austerity has had a dramatic impact on their ability to make a difference. The Government certainly have the profession in their sights. Since 2010, there has been an aggressive focus, which, as noted by the National Audit Office and a number of cross-party groups, is yielding no positive results in the reform of social work or social work assessment and accreditation, giving a clear signal that this Government feel the problems are with social workers, not the system.

With that in mind, can the Minister can shed any light on the hash that has been made of the new accreditation for social workers? After an embarrassing climbdown, accreditation will now only be of 4% of social workers by 2020, as opposed to the planned 100%. Since there is a groundswell of opposition from the profession, does the Minister not think it is about time to scrap this nonsense altogether?

Social Work England, another Department for Education initiative born out of zero discussion with the profession, has also been subject to some backtracking, after the Government thankfully failed to secure direct regulation of social workers. Will the Minister explain when the regulations will be produced for Social Work England? Clarity is needed regarding transition from the Health and Care Professionals Council, and social workers need some assurances that they will not be hit with exorbitant fees. Both of those developments signify to the profession that the Government have little faith in them and feel they need to be regulated and subjected to state control to a much higher degree than any other profession. Will the Minister please explain why that is?

In spite of all that, the profession survives. Excellent social work happens every single day in all areas of our country. Children and adults are protected from harm and their lives are improved. If the Minister really believes that our children, adults and families need the very best, he is in a position where he can actually deliver on what our profession is crying out for. I wonder if he will commit to that today and offer more than just warm words.
area soon becomes clear. From the world of think-tanks, the Eileen Munro review, the charity sector, the Children’s Commissioner, and more recently as a constituency Member of Parliament, his experience is considerable and wide-ranging. So too is the experience of my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). I could listen to them all day and I have been taking note of everything they say.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar focused his contribution on the work of children and family social workers and I will respond accordingly, but before I do so, I should place on record the valuable work done by those in the adult social care community. When I speak of the value to society of social workers, I very much include all social workers.

Above all else, we agree on a single unarguable point: social workers have a vital job in ensuring that vulnerable adults, children and families receive the best possible support to help them to overcome the challenges they face, and to enable them to look positively towards their future. I have only been Minister for children and families for a few months, but so far, from my visits to children’s services across the country, I have seen a dedicated and passionate workforce. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham described what is needed in one word: leadership. When we see good leadership, we see good outcomes for children. Every day, social workers deal with complex and challenging situations. The one thing they say to me is that there is no magic sauce—whether it is the trust in Doncaster that has turned it around, or in Hackney, which had a turnaround—is consistent leadership: people they can refer to and teams they can work with, knowing they will be there the next day.

Social workers play a unique role in supporting people, often at the most difficult times in their lives. To do that successfully, they require a distinctive set of skills, knowledge and values. To do their job well requires compassion, empathy, analytical thinking and an understanding of the positive impact they can have in people’s lives. They work with complexity, uncertainty and conflict within a complex legal framework. They are required to use sound professional judgment in balancing needs, risks and resources to achieve the right outcomes. Done well, social work can improve people’s opportunities and quality of life, enabling them to lead the lives they want to lead.

In my constituency, I often hear from people in the social care system. It is overwhelming. To work closely, day in, day out, with such difficult and sometimes devastating cases requires exceptional passion and resilience. Members across Parliament will all be familiar with that from their surgeries. It is a job that a precious and extraordinary minority undertake and we must do all we can to support, empower and elevate the profession. As a Minister, I see this as one of my key priorities, and I will do my utmost to ensure that social workers get the recognition they deserve.

The debate is timely. As colleagues have mentioned, World Social Work Day is a week today and provides a moment to pause, reflect and celebrate the difference that social workers make. We in Government will be doing our bit to promote and champion the profession, both in what we say publicly and in how we support social workers.

All children, no matter where they live, should have access to the same high-quality care and support. That is about empowering social workers to excel even further in their practice, as well as building public confidence in the social work profession. One thing is clear: the quality of social work practice is, above all, the core of what we want to achieve. This is vital work and the reason we are prioritising social work reform. Social workers are not always given the right tools for the job, and can be held back by burdensome systems, which we have heard colleagues eloquently describe, including the horrendous time it takes to fill in a form.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar spoke with authority about the Munro review, about reducing bureaucracy and about empowering professional judgement. What he said is true, and while great progress has been made, more is to be done. Those entering the social work profession must have the best training possible. Teaching partnerships bring together universities and local authorities to improve the quality of social work degrees. Good continuing professional development is also essential, particularly at key stages of a social worker’s career such as the daunting task of moving from education to employment and when stepping up from the frontline to manage and supervise teams, and for those aspiring to be social work practice leaders. I believe that these reforms will have a positive impact for all and, most importantly, vulnerable children, families and adults in need of support.

I draw attention to two specific reforms mentioned by the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck). The first is the new accreditation scheme for child and family social workers. Through that innovative programme, we will introduce post-qualifying standards for child and family social work expertise, based on the current knowledge and skills statements, and offer voluntary assessment against them. The introduction of the standards will mean that employers and social workers will have a national benchmark to aim for, and learning and development can be planned in line with meeting the standard. If a social worker takes the assessment and becomes accredited, they may be offered career development opportunities, including promotion. I heard it directly from social workers who are involved in the early stage. We are doing this with social workers, rather than to them.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have not got much time, but let me see how far I get because I want to talk about Social Work England as well.

We are supporting local authorities and social workers to get ready for this new system in a unique way, working with early adopters. Rather than, as in the example given by my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar, stuff being done to them by it people who know nothing about them, we are co-creating the assessment and accreditation. We will be working with more than 150 children and family social workers. I am also delighted that Essex County Council is in discussions with the Department about becoming a phase 2 national assessment and accreditation system site from 2019.

The other major reform I want to highlight is establishing Social Work England. Focused purely on social work, this bespoke professional regulator will cover both children
and family social workers and those working in adult services. Social Work England will have public protection at the heart of all its work, but it is more than just that. It will support professionalism and standards across the social work profession.

Alex Cunningham: I have two small questions. First, I agree with the need for ongoing professional development, but where will the time come from in social workers’ busy schedules to take this critical training? Secondly, does the Minister not agree that it is time that social workers got a decent pay rise?

Nadhim Zahawi: I dealt with funding at the outset. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar that funding has increased since 2010.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Does the Minister share his predecessor’s view that local authority children’s services departments do not need any more money because they are not spending what they currently have appropriately? How on earth does he think it conceivable that any difference can be made, even if money is put into the system, when ongoing Government austerity is cutting every other service that impacts on children’s social services?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have already put on record what we are doing in terms of reviewing the funding for this area.

As a social care-specific regulator, Social Work England will develop an in-depth understanding of the profession. It will use that to set profession-specific standards that clarify expectations about the knowledge, skills, values and behaviours required to become and remain a registered social worker. Finally, it will play a key role in promoting public confidence in the profession, championing the profession and helping to raise the status of social work.

It is fair to say that creating a new regulator is no easy task, but we are making great progress. In December, we launched the recruitment of the chair and CEO of Social Work England. In February, we launched a consultation on Social Work England’s regulatory framework. I think that the hon. Lady mistakenly alluded to there being no consultation, but there clearly was. The consultation sets out our approach to establishing the secondary legislative framework for Social Work England. Our ambition is to create a proportionate and efficient regulator. As part of this, we need Social Work England to be able to operate systems and processes that adapt to emerging opportunities, challenges and best practice. That means it can ensure professional regulation reflects the changing reality of delivering social work practice safely and effectively.

I shall end there in an attempt to be disciplined in the timekeeping that you asked of us, Mr Hollobone.

Alex Burghart: I thank you very much, Mr Hollobone, and all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate.

One of the resounding messages that we can send out from this place is that we all value highly the work that social workers do. It is an extraordinarily difficult job. When we contemplate the families who are helped by the expertise of this professional body, we have only to imagine what would happen if those social workers were not there. If we left those families and children in homes with extraordinarily complex mental health problems, addiction, alcohol and drug dependency and the most extraordinary and extreme forms of family breakdown, without that professional support, we could only expect the absolute worst for them.

The social work profession gives so much to society. At its most extreme, it keeps people alive, but in a sense it does more than that: it gives people a life. It helps them to overcome their barriers to work, to good health and to opportunity. Being a frontline social worker is, too often, a highly complex and difficult task, but it does not have to be a thankless one. It is incumbent on all of us to support our social workers in policy terms and in professional terms.

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. This subject is very dear to my heart, as I shall explain. The life chances of children in care—they are also referred to as looked-after children—are significantly lower than those of other children. That applies to their prospects of getting well-paid employment, their educational achievement and the chances of them being involved in the criminal justice system. Foster care is where 75% of children in care are looked after, so supporting foster-carers is essential to ensuring the best possible outcomes—the best life chances—for the majority of children in care. Ensuring that foster care is as positive an experience as possible, maximising its benefits and minimising its risks and downsides, and ensuring the best outcomes for looked-after children, must be a priority for anyone who is interested and for everyone in a position of authority with responsibility, be that in national Government or in local government.

The outcomes for looked-after children show just what a contrast there is. Let me take educational achievement at year 11. The Minister will be all too well aware of these figures. Some 18% of looked-after children achieved A* to C grades in English and maths, and 14% achieved five or more A* to C grades, including English and maths. The figures for children as a whole are 59% and 53%, so looked-after children's achievement is something like one quarter to one third of other children's. That on its own tells a story.

Children in care are around five times more likely than other children to find themselves convicted of an offence between the ages of 10 and 17. Former looked-after children have difficulty establishing and holding down good relationships later in life, many of them have mental health difficulties that continue right through their lives, and many find themselves with housing difficulties or homeless. In 2015, 39% of care leavers were not in education, employment or training. That figure is far too high for comfort. Given those figures, it is essential that we ensure that children in care and those who care for them receive the best possible support, so that as much as possible can be done to improve outcomes.

Bill Esterson: My hon. Friend makes his point extremely well. I know many foster-carers, and I am sure that other Members here do too. The vast majority do exactly as he said: they provide an extremely supportive, loving and caring environment. They do their best to deliver the kinds of outcomes he mentioned, in the face of great difficulty, due, as he said, to the cuts forced upon local government. I have nothing but the highest regard for foster-carers and the work they do.

One of the challenges is delivering permanence for young people in care to ensure that they receive a long-term settled placement that is right for them. The Government have placed enormous importance on children being adopted. As I said, I have two adopted children. It was decided that that was the best outcome for them. They have siblings who were not adopted, and for the vast majority of children who go into care, that is not the way forward. Foster care is often a long-term option. It is really important—there are many dear old friends in the Chamber with whom I have debated this over the years—that we see adoption, fostering, residential care or kinship care not as better, but as the right outcome for the individual child. It is incredibly important to restate that.

One of the challenges right now is ensuring that we do not lose sight of putting the individual child first. My hon. Friend mentioned austerity. We have seen cuts in early intervention of 55% since 2010. It is predicted that there will be a £2 billion shortfall in the children’s services budget by 2020. The number of children on child protection plans has risen by 83% since 2010. Social workers’ case loads are rising. Local authorities have reduced the number of social workers they employ directly and have become more reliant on agency workers, who are more expensive. Although budgets have fallen, spending on children’s services has actually increased, which means that money has been taken from elsewhere, including early intervention. Many in child protection, in children’s services more widely and in local government, say that we are at crisis point in terms of both the social impact and the economic situation.

Yesterday, I was with someone from Northamptonshire County Council who is responsible for children’s services. He has been told that he cannot spend on discretionary services at all, so he will not be able to increase the number of social workers. What does that mean for foster-carers? It means that when a child comes to live with a foster-carer, there is no prospect of money for clothes or anything other than the weekly allowance, not just in Northamptonshire but everywhere. Foster-carers therefore have to pay for absolutely everything, whether new clothes for a new arrival, a holiday or any kind of additional support for the children.
Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I should declare my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on holding this unmentionable but important debate. He will be aware that funding of children’s services has increased, albeit in very challenging circumstances—particularly now—but there are huge differentials between experiences with different authorities. As a study by the all-party parliamentary group for children found, in one authority 166 children per 10,000 will be taken into care and, at the other end, at another authority the figure is 22 for every 10,000 children. There are similar big differentials for referrals to children’s services, child protection plans and so on. To what does he attribute the huge difference in experiences of vulnerable children in different authorities? It is not just based on funding pressures.

Bill Esterson: That is probably more of a question for the Minister. The hon. Gentleman said that funding had gone up. It is true that spending has gone up, but funding from central Government for local authorities is significantly down, including in children’s services. Some local authorities have seen significant cuts and some have seen very few. That may have something to do with what he says.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I do not want to stop my hon. Friend because he is making some incredibly important points, but there is also a clear issue about cuts to services other than children’s services, which are putting greater strain on local authorities. In areas of high deprivation, where all those services are under significant strain, the result is much worse outcomes for children. It is essential to look at the whole picture of what is happening to these children every day in their communities.

Bill Esterson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We cannot ignore the effects of the wider local government and public service spending situation. Numerous organisations who provided briefings for the debate pointed out that if the support is not there for families, it is difficult for local authorities to provide in children’s services. Some local authorities have seen significant cuts and some have seen very few. That may have something to do with what he says.

Bill Esterson: Absolutely. It is well established that continuity and stability are vital to the long-term wellbeing and life chances of children in care. In foster care, that applies to the carer and also to social workers. One point made in the briefings is that there has not been continuity between social workers. A child and their foster-family need support from a social worker, but in far too many cases they rarely see the same social worker. There is not one there or because they keep changing. That is damaging, as my hon. Friend points out.

We have recently had two inquiries—the national fostering stocktake requested by the Government and the inquiry into fostering by the Education Committee—which have made several recommendations that will not address them all, but there is evidence—this also emerges from the briefings—that while overall there are enough foster-carers, there are regional disparities. There are also problems in providing foster-carers for some groups, whether those are ethnic minorities, siblings, children with special needs or disabled children, so a challenge is how we improve the number of foster-carers who have the specialisms and skills to look after children in those groups.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I apologise for arriving slightly late for the debate. We had a roundtable on faith and fostering yesterday, and I hope to get a chance to contribute on that later. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the challenges is that people of religious backgrounds feel that that is perceived as a barrier to their genuine intention to offer a home for good for children who need it in fostering, and that we need to get over the idea that in some way having a faith is problematic?

Bill Esterson: The answer is that in all cases the consideration must be what is in the best interests of the child. That has been my view for as long as I have looked at this.

Some of the briefings pointed out the need to recruit and retrain better, to deal with the shortages in the areas I touched on. To address that point, the stocktake and the Select Committee both recommended a national register of foster-carers. I also notice that the stocktake suggested that local authorities pool resources. There have been consortia over many years, which I thought were part of doing just that.

On a national register, one of the challenges is that often needs are local. I think the Government have made the point that it is often desirable for children in care to be relatively close to home—although not in some cases of problems with their birth families—and a national register does not always address that. There are some real tensions around that recommendation.

The stocktake concluded that pay was not an issue. The feedback I have had is that that is totally untrue. Foster-carers have seen their allowances cut. I mentioned that there are not payments for additional support or for when a child arrives, and the money that foster-carers receive is not what it used to be and is under pressure. We must be wary about that and ensure that they are properly remunerated.

As to whether foster-carers should be regarded as professionals, I understand why the stocktake says they should not be—it does not want to take away from the fact that they are there to provide a family environment, and that is quite right. However, we also need to regard them as holding an incredibly highly skilled, professional role. There is a degree of professionalism, and it is
wrong not to recognise foster-carers in that respect. There are, therefore, some tensions around what is being recommended.

The Government have not yet responded to either of the two reports. It is probably a little early to expect the Minister to respond today to all the issues in those reports, but I hope he will reply to some of the points raised in the debate. In reality, only 3% of children are adopted, and 75% of looked-after children are in foster care. The scale of cuts experienced by local government has clearly created challenges in providing the support and resources that are needed to look after children and improve the outcomes I mentioned earlier. Unless there is a step change in our approach, it will become harder to prevent children from entering care in the first place, and harder to provide support that puts families back together when that would be the best outcome for the child.

It is no coincidence that more children are in care than at any time since 1985. If those numbers are to reduce, the Government must intervene to ensure that local authorities, social workers, foster-carers, and everybody who is dedicated to supporting and improving the life chances of children who end up in our care system have the support they need to do the best for those children. Only the Government can take such action—the £2 billion figure is very significant, and I hope that the Minister will listen to Members from across the House who, I suspect, will raise similar points about the need to get this right.

I mentioned both social and economic effects. If it is not possible to do the best by a child, that is disastrous for that child, and also for their birth family, foster-carers, and others involved in their care. There is also, however, an economic cost, and perhaps the Minister—or another Member—will remind us just how expensive it is to provide lifetime support for someone who does not recover from the neglect and abuse that puts them into care in the first place. I have not mentioned prisons, but a significant proportion of our prison population are people who were in care. We must act and intervene early, not late, if we are to prevent children from entering care in the first place, and harder to provide support that puts families back together when that would be the best outcome for the child.

The focus of the roundtable was the question of faith and fostering because, as I indicated earlier, a myth often abounds that people of faith are debarred from the opportunity to provide foster care. In reality, however, people often put themselves forward to be foster-carers precisely because of their faith and because their beliefs prompt them to open their home to those in need.

Other myths abound—for example, that it is not possible for a Christian foster-parent to foster a Muslim child. That is patently untrue. A Muslim child may have had an experience in their past that means that they wish precisely not to be fostered within their own religion, or the reverse could be true. As we know, the media have not done fostering a good service by sensationalising a particular case where there was an apparent mismatch between the faith background of the child and that of the family. However, that particular local authority has a good track record of going out of its way to try to provide good matches, and it shows remarkably good faith-literacy in trying to get the right answer for the child, with the child’s needs at the centre of that.

Some good points came out of the roundtable, including the need for greater faith-literacy in social work. I think it is increasingly accepted more readily in society that in order to understand different faiths and the differences between them, and the implications of that for the world we live in today, we all need to be more literate about other people’s faiths and indeed people of no faith. We must understand those things much better, and we will get better matching if we can do so.

I think we must also go out of our way to reach some minority ethnic potential foster-carer applicants, because in many cases they are even more fearful about the question of faith when it is raised. Tellingly, the director of Home for Good spoke about a “cool wall” that he has in his office, on which he pastes the first thoughts that come to mind among the social workers he interviews regarding people of different faiths. Intrinsically, people have an instinctive set of adjectives that they may apply to one faith or another, and depressing, right across the piece, on the whole those adjectives were negative. That myth really needs to be dispelled. We are closing our minds to the opportunity presented by people of faith who are prompted to offer help in such a way.

When we were suddenly faced with large numbers of Syrian families who the Prime Minister had pledged to accommodate, there was an outpouring of offers from churches and others who wished to provide homes for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, or for whole Syrian families in order to keep siblings together. Sadly, however, it was difficult to capture the opportunity of that offer, and many of those who came forward to offer their homes temporarily, or for good, found that that was not followed through. In some cases, there was also anecdotal evidence of the view that said, “Well, they should put their names forward to offer their homes first to the existing large numbers of children in care who need a home.” The moment was missed, and I hope we can learn from that.

Mr Sheerman: The right hon. Lady and I both chaired parts of the seminars yesterday. Does she share my concern that, in addition to the very dramatic calls that come out of the Syrian crisis, we need a much better campaign to identify the right sort of people who would be good foster-carers, and ensure that they are networked and trained?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I could not agree more. An important point that came out of the roundtable was that evidence must exist to help to support the fact that
people of faith who offer their homes for good—for fostering—often prove to have greater “stickability”, and tend to stick with a child through thick and thin until they are launched into the world as an independent adult. I would like that evidence to be brought out in the open. It is collected; we know the data exists. There are data on the religious background of all the children in care, and of the foster-carers who come forward. It is about time that we used that evidence base to bust the myths.

Tim Loughton: My right hon. Friend is making a good point. Interestingly, the crisis point when Syrian refugees came to this country resulted in an increase in the number of families offering themselves as foster-carers or adopters for the long term. On her point about people of faith, we must remember that the Children’s Society was the Church of England Children’s Society. Barnardo’s was built on religious foundations. The important question is which family can offer the best and most appropriate loving home to a child in need of fostering or adoption. The Government had to change the law on adoption because of the prejudice against people who happen not to be of the same cultural or faith background, which excluded children who could have had a perfectly good, stable home with those parents—but it was not allowed. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the question is not one of cultural matching, but one of cultural sensitivity to a child’s background?

Dame Caroline Spelman: My hon. Friend, who is very knowledgeable about this matter, makes an extremely valid point. The issue is about opening our minds, removing barriers and preconceptions about why people cannot foster, and looking at the best solution for the child.

I know that there is pressure on time, Mr Howarth, and I do not want to delay the Minister’s response to the debate, but I just want to finish by mentioning something by way of a case study. One of the foster-carers present at yesterday’s event spoke powerfully about the five children in her care. She is of white Caucasian background and is married to a Jamaican, and they foster some Muslim children, some children of Christian heritage and some of no faith. Things work well in her household, which has proved a good match for those children. I think that challenges all of us to be more open-minded about opportunities to increase the number of foster-carers.

Another important point is that often people of faith are in communities of faith. When parents in a church community, for example, come forward to offer their home as a home for good, there is a tendency for others in that church community to be prompted to think, “Could I do that? If they can, I should be able to.” Before long, two or three families in the communities are fostering. The amazing advantage is that they support each other in the community, and the children feel more comfortable because they find others in their position. I encourage the Minister to help with that aspect, which was missed in the stocktake. Perhaps it is a little unfair to say that the official from the Department for Education who attended the round table pledged to bring the point back to the Department. I sincerely hope that when, as it will have to, the Department responds to the two reports—this is why the debate is so timely—the point about faith and fostering will not be missed.

10.3 am

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) on securing the debate. As the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, it may not be fashionable, but it is critical. I could not agree more with the sentiments expressed by the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) about the role of faith in fostering. The placement must be right for, and meet the needs of, the child. That means we must pay attention to the things that matter to the children who enter the care system.

I want to begin by asking why so many children are being taken into care in the first place. The Minister will be aware that I worked with children and young people for some time before I entered Parliament. I have never known the situation for children and families in this country to be as desperate as it is currently. We should be deeply concerned about the fact that the number of children in care is, as Barnardo’s says, at its highest point since the mid-1980s. The number of children entering the care system has increased every year for nine years. In the first six years of the coalition and Conservative Governments, the number of children subject to a child protection plan went up by 29%. The Minister will be aware that the Association of Directors of Children’s Services identified a £2 billion funding gap, which my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central mentioned, between the demand for children’s services and the available resources. Often when I have conversations with social workers they tell me that they are unable to take children into care when they think they need to, because of the resources available. That suggests that the situation is even starker than the figures lead us to understand.

The ADCS is clear about the reasons for what is happening. It has laid the blame squarely at the door of the coalition austerity policies that have continued under the present Government. It has blamed long delays for universal credit, and I recognise that issue from my constituency, which was a pilot area. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham shakes his head, but I spent Friday sitting with representatives of charities, primary school teachers, police and clergy in one of the poorest areas of my constituency, and some of those people were in tears because in 19 years of working with children in that community they have never known a situation so bad: it is to do with policies such as the two-child limit on benefits and the housing benefit cuts. In my area in particular the bedroom tax has been devastating. We never had the smaller properties, but we had big family homes; they were built on purpose because they were better for families. We placed families in them, and suddenly told them, “You can’t pay your rent, and it is your own fault.” The impact on those families has been devastating. There is usually nowhere to move to apart from the private rented sector, and we do not have a huge private rented sector, so many people are stuck in their accommodation accruing arrears and worrying every day how they will pay the bills and feed their children.
The situation has an impact on the profession, too. There are currently 5,540 child and family social work vacancies. That means that 13% of the children's social work workforce is missing. Is it any wonder, then, that there are issues of continuity of care and support for children, as my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) has mentioned? During the time in question, support outside children's services has been stripped away; 600 youth centres have closed in four years; there has been a huge loss of Sure Start and children's centres across the country. The upshot is stark. As the ADCS found in a report last year, children in the poorest areas are 10 times more likely to be put on a child protection plan or be subject to care proceedings than those in the wealthiest areas. It is an absolute disgrace.

While I sit with frontline workers in my constituency on Friday trying to work through with them how better to support families in crisis, representatives of the secondary school—the academy—were absent. There were police at the meeting to raise concerns about the welfare of particular children. The academy tells me that it has not expelled them, but it has given them managed transfers outside the school—presumably because of the impact of some of the children on results. From 2010 onwards, many of the Members present for the debate have been coming to debates and Select Committees warning Ministers that if the children's service workforce is fragmented—if that family of professionals who used to hang on to children and families in times of crisis is broken up—the result will be what is happening now. We see it in our communities; we see the impact on children.

I want to focus on what happens to children when they go into care. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central has said, there has been a lot of focus on adoption in recent years. I do not criticise the Government at all for wanting to look closely at what happens in adoption, and to make sure that the children for whom it is right get placements quickly—that they do not miss out and find that there are no suitable families to take them. However, as my hon. Friend said, the vast majority of children in the care system are fostered. There was a lot of anxiety, in the years when it seemed that the Government were interested only in adoption services, about the lack of attention being paid to pressing problems in fostering. That is why the fostering stocktake was greeted with such enthusiasm by the sector, but it would be wrong not to explain to the Minister the real sense of anger and frustration about the fostering stocktake and its inability to deliver on the promise it made.

Before I talk a little bit about some of the problems that have emerged with that report, I will say that one area in which it is particularly strong—knowing Martin Narey as I have for many years, I am not surprised by that—is the positive role that care can play in children's lives. He is absolutely right to highlight in the report the fact that it is not primarily the fault of the care system that children often leave care with such poor educational outcomes. My hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central cited the figures on young people from the care system who get into trouble with the law or end up in prison.

In the vast majority of cases, the care system does a tremendous job in supporting and enabling children to go on and live better lives than they would otherwise have done. We cannot expect the care system to compensate entirely for every single thing that happens to children before they come into care. In fact, to see the most successful examples of children who have left care, we must look to the children themselves, their motivations and aspirations, and the support we package around that, rather than telling them how to do it.

The concern about the fostering stocktake centres on a number of key areas. There is a real sense that it is dismissive of the shortage of foster-carers and therefore the numbers who are placed outside care. As my hon. Friend rightly said, it is not that there are not enough foster-carers in the country, but that there is not enough spare capacity, so that when a child in one particular area needs a foster-placement that is available in that area. As a consequence, we are still seeing far too many children moved outside their area, stranded a long way from school, family members and friends.

In all the time I worked with children and young people, what stayed with me most was that the thing that sustains them through the hardest time in their life—being taken away from family and forced to confront a whole new life unfolding ahead of them—is relationships. Sustaining those relationships ought to be a primary goal of public policy for these children, because friends and family are their top priority. It cannot be right that, at the moment when they feel they have lost everything, they also lose the trusted aunt, the best friend or the teacher who cared.

The fostering stocktake does not pay anywhere near enough attention to that issue, or to the fact that one third of foster-carers are now being referred to look after children who lack any prior knowledge about them and whose needs are outside their approved scope, as the Fostering Network reminded me this morning. The stocktake does not reflect the real hardship that many foster-carers have to endure in order to care for children. The Minister will be aware of the “State of the Nation’s Foster Care” report that the Fostering Network undertakes every two years. The most recent one was published in 2016. Some 2,500 foster-carers were consulted and 42% of them said that their allowances covered the costs. That left 58% of foster-carers who had to dig into their own pockets to cover the full cost of foster care.

To me, that seems to be nonsense. It matters to all of us that we get this right for children. We should not be saying to those children or the people who step up to care for them that they have to suffer hardship to do it. There is an issue with staying put, which the Minister may be aware of; one third of foster-carers who did not continue with placements said it was down to financial hardship. He will know of the huge battle that many of us in this House fought to get that on the agenda. We were led by my right hon. Friend, the late Paul Goggins, who did such tremendous work for children. The former children’s Minister, Edward Timpson, rightly took that issue up and said, “We have to do right by these children; we have to make sure they have the same level of stability as we would expect in any other family.” The truth is that it is not working, and the reason is the level of allowances that are paid, or sometimes not paid at all, to those foster-carers.

Mr Sheerman: I agree with almost every word that my hon. Friend says, but what comes out of both reports is the amateur basis on which we have run fostering for a long time. We do not have a national...
register or a national training system, and getting the balance between fostering as a calling and as a profession has not been addressed.

Lisa Nandy: As always, I have reason to thank my hon. Friend, because he brings me nicely and neatly on to my final concern, which I think is shared by many outside this place, about the fostering stocktake. The sense of professionalism that many foster-carers feel about the work they do is not adequately reflected in the report. I would really like to hear from the Minister a response to the concern that, while foster-carers foster out of compassion, love and a sense of duty to step up and care for some of the most vulnerable children in the country at a moment of crisis, foster-carers’ rights and children’s rights are pitted against each other in this report.

That is the problem with the report. In all the foster situations that I have had the privilege to witness or deal with over the last 20 years, I can tell the Minister that the needs and the rights of foster-carers and the children they care for go hand in hand. They are integral to each other. I would be grateful if he said something about the professionalism with which foster-carers conduct themselves, and the need for a formal structure around fostering.

What has disappointed me most of all about the fostering stocktake, and about Government policy in recent years, is that the voice of the child does not seem to be present in either. When we talk to children, as the Minister will know, they tell us that stability, security and preserving those relationships are central to them.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Lady makes a very persuasive point. I do not know whether she has read this book, but if colleagues have not done so, I was profoundly moved by reading “My Name is Leon”, which was turned into a film. It is told from the perspective of a child aged nine in the system. It certainly altered my understanding of what it feels like for them. The absence of the child’s voice from the fostering stocktake, and about Government policy in recent years, is that the voice of the child does not seem to be present in either. When we talk to children, as the Minister will know, they tell us that stability, security and preserving those relationships are central to them.

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady. I have read that book. Before I came to this place I worked for the Children’s Society, and before that I worked for Centrepoint with young homeless teenagers. Almost on a daily basis, when I worked in those roles, speaking to children and young people surprised me. They said very different things about their own ambitions and aspirations, the way they perceived injustice and what mattered to them from what we had assumed, sitting in an office 200 miles away.

The absence of the child’s voice from the fostering stocktake is really quite serious. I would be grateful if the Minister, when he responds to the debate, said something about how the Department is making efforts to ensure that children’s voices are heard as the Government responds to the fostering stocktake. In all the time I worked with children and young people, the need for stability and security and to preserve those relationships was at the heart of what they felt mattered.

I will never forget sitting with a nine-year-old child who shook with anger, who did not want to talk to me or anyone in the room about her own experiences. The former Children’s Commissioner had set up the meeting with children and young people so they could talk to us about their experiences of care. After a while, the child said, “Well, why should I talk to you? Who are you?” She was right; why should she? She said, “And how long are you sticking around?” I asked her, “Have you had a lot of people in your life?” She had had six social workers in three years.

I say to the Minister that we must take that seriously for children, and one of the reasons we are totally unable to get to grips with it is the austerity policies this Government are pursuing, which are causing havoc in communities such as mine. I appreciate that he is the Minister for Schools—the Minister for Children and Families has to be at the Select Committee on Education and therefore, disappointingly, cannot be here—so this is slightly outside of his natural remit. However, he must see the impact of this on children every day when he talks to teachers and teaching assistants in his own schools. I say to him what one of the teaching assistants said to me on Friday: the biggest threat to family life in this country now is this Government. That has to be taken seriously.

I want to ask the Minister a particular question about stability for children. I am not sure whether he can answer it, but if not, I would appreciate it if he wrote to me. As he knows, there was a Westminster Hall debate before Christmas, in which the Government committed to ensuring that foster-children were covered by the 30-hours childcare pledge. That was extremely welcome, but the then Minister for children was, unfortunately, sacked in the reshuffle a few weeks later. I wrote to his successor, who kindly wrote back and said that the Government were still progressing those plans to ensure that foster-children were covered by the 30-hours pledge. However, his letter caused me some concern, because he wrote that the Government were developing plans to “allow access to extended entitlement where foster parents are working outside of their fostering responsibilities.”

I would really like to know what happens if a child already has the 30-hours entitlement and therefore has a place at a nursery or other childcare setting, then goes into foster care where the foster-carer is not working. If the child were to lose that place as a consequence of going into foster care, it would cause all the damage that is done, as I have explained, when children lose not only their families, but their friends and everything that is familiar to them. I would also be grateful if the Minister clarified whether those plans are developing at sufficient speed, so that families will be able to access them by this September.

I am aware, Mr Howarth, that I have taken up a great deal of time, and I apologise to other Members for doing so, but I feel that this debate, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central, is absolutely central to a group of people in this country who do not have a voice. They do not have the right to vote and they are not normally heard in this place. However, they have every bit of ambition, optimism, energy, creativity and commitment to the future that each of us have—in fact, in my experience, they have more. Sadly, at the moment, we are lacking a plan that matches that. We have to do better.
Scotland will be entitled to full university bursaries, and First, all young people who have experienced care in during the next two years with 1,000 people who have Government are committed to having a conversation to hear the voices of young people. The Scottish people themselves. We heard earlier how important it is our young people. It will be driven and shaped by young legislation, practices, culture and ethos of the care for review of the care system, and examining the underpinning prospects for children in the care system. They are currently undertaking an independent root and branch review of the care system in England. The report made a number of recommendations to the Government. For example, foster-carers should be paid at least a national minimum allowance; that is a no-brainer. A national college should be established, working across England to improve working conditions for carers. Foster-carers should be provided with a resource for training support and given a national voice and representation—absolutely. A national recruitment campaign should be launched. There should be a free childcare entitlement for children in foster care. Any decent society would consider those the bare minimum standards.

While the Committee report is wholly focused on England, it also calls on the UK Government to undertake many of the actions that are already happening in Scotland, and highlights and references the work done by the Scottish Government, which I will now expand on. The Scottish National party Scottish Government by the Scottish Government, which I will now expand Scotland, and highlights and references the work done many of the actions that are already happening in England, it also calls on the UK Government to undertake for children in foster care. Any decent society would absolutely. A national recruitment campaign should be

I am proud to say that in Scotland we are seeing real progress. School exclusions are down and the number in permanent—rather than temporary—placements is up. However, we know that more still needs to be done and we cannot ignore the reality for children in care. Why? Sadly, the statistics are still horrifying and should horrify everyone in this Chamber. Of young people who have been in care, only 6% go to university and almost half will suffer mental health issues. One in two of the adult prison population lived in care when they were growing up—one in two. Lastly, I think this is the most horrific statistic of all—a young person who has been in care is 20 times more likely to be dead by the time they are 25 than a young person who has not. Let us pause for a few seconds to take that in. Many of us will have children or nieces and nephews. All of you have been children yourselves. Think about what is being said.

I would like to put it on record for the first time that I am truly grateful and thankful for the love, care and support that I got from those individuals who allowed me to call them by their first names, as I experienced both foster care and care in a home—Uncle Eddie, Uncle Pete, Aunt Nan and Aunt Lynn. I have to say to Auntie Rhona, who used to look after my hair, well, it didn’t work in the long run. I have never spoken about this publicly before, because often it is like an indelible mark, a stain of shame that we keep to ourselves, and this publicly before, because often it is like an indelible mark, a stain of shame that we keep to ourselves, and that I find it difficult to speak about today, but I am proud to be able to stand here today and not be silent on the matter. I speak for the many thousands out there who are yet to have their voices heard.

I am one of the lucky ones. I know, from someone who has been touch with me over the years, that others have not been so lucky, and fulfil more than half of the shocking statistics I have just outlined. Sadly, as I have said, we carry this dirt little secret. It profoundly affects our relationships at home and with each other outside, our experiences and our life opportunities for the rest of our lives. So it goes without saying that the Education Committee’s report is hugely valuable and all its recommendations should be taken on board. An independent, root and branch review is vital to ensure that we get it right for every child across these islands. What is being done in Scotland is a huge step in the right direction. We should not play party politics on this. This is for all of us to get right.
Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) for securing this debate. His practical experience and knowledge of fostering made for a formidable opening speech. I pay tribute to all other Members who have contributed, especially the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who it is a pleasure to follow. We are honoured that you shared your story with us today.

Since 2010 we have seen an exponential rise in the number of children coming into care. There are now 72,000—the highest since the 1980s. There is a wealth of evidence that the Government’s forced austerity measures are driving that increase. With the stream of referrals coming into children’s services departments leading to 90 young people entering the care system in England every single day, the implications for fostering are clear. That is why so many of us were keen to see the long-awaited fostering report, which was first announced in 2016 and released this February. Sadly, for some of us, that keenness quickly waned. Today I will focus on that report.

The report has received more criticism than praise, and is viewed by many as lacking vision about transforming the dire state of fostering in England. It makes assumptions based on opinion, not evidence. It makes a number of unqualified, sweeping generalisations. In my view, our children and foster-carers deserve better.

It is essential that there are enough foster-carers to meet demand. At present, there simply are not. The pitiful pay given to foster-carers, leading to some of them making the painful decision that they cannot continue in that role, coupled with the Education Committee’s findings that identified the Government’s lack of efforts in the recruitment of new foster-carers, suggest that we are on a trajectory where there will not be enough homes for the children who need them.

Foster-carers are deeply committed to every single child in their care. So it was disappointing to see that the stocktake claims that carers are not routinely underpaid, and that they are paid adequately. That is simply wrong. We know that a quarter of carers receive the equivalent of less than £1.70 an hour, based on a notional 40-hour week, and 90% of our foster-carers do not receive the national living wage. The right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who chairs the Education Committee, summed up its findings by saying that, “it is clear that too many are not adequately supported, neither financially nor professionally, in the vital work that they do.”

Should it not be an embarrassment for the Minister and the Government that they are presiding over a situation where foster-carers, who provide an excellent standard of care day in, day out, report that they are struggling to support not only themselves but the children who are entrusted to their care?

Carers who are struggling are also being offered golden hellos from independent fostering agencies to leave the local authorities they work with. Those agencies then charge local authorities higher rates. The undercutting by independent fostering agencies is a pattern that has been identified by many social workers and the Conservative vice-chair of the Local Government Association. Yet, the review denies the existence of such a practice, claiming that the reverse is happening—that councils are poaching foster-carers from independent agencies. That bizarre claim is based on nothing other than the authors’ perception. I really hope that the Minister will look closely at the regulation of commercial fostering agencies, as the Labour party has.

I, with others, was aghast when I saw in the report a raft of recommendations that would require primary legislative change. The report recommended that carers be given prominence over the day-to-day decisions regarding children in their care—pre-eminence over birth parents, even when the children are in voluntary accommodation. That is at complete odds with the current legislation on parental responsibility and is simply wrong. The report’s authors do not seem to realise that there is already provision in legislation to take account of parental disagreement.

A deeply worrying recommendation, based on very little evidence, was also made that local authorities should scrap independent reviewing officers. IROs are a fundamental part of the care system. They were created to protect the rights of vulnerable children in care, to advocate for them and to ensure that their needs are met. Without IROs, a child who is unhappy or—worse—being abused in their placement, could literally have nobody at all to turn to. Imagine being that child, who has been removed from a place of harm into a placement where that harm endures, when there is nobody to tell about it and no escape. I am sure the Minister agrees that removing such safeguards would be at the Government’s peril, and that judicial consequences will certainly follow.

In the report there is also a fixation on legal status. It claims that the priority must be to convert more fostering placements into permanent arrangements. Apart from the obvious fact that an emphasis on legal status, rather than a child’s individual needs, is at odds with good practice, it completely ignores the availability and benefits of other options, such as long-term foster care. Every single child in the care arena is completely different and has different needs. That is why there are a number of options for care. Decisions should always be made on a child-by-child basis. The cynical view cannot help think that the authors’ predilection for adoption or special guardianship is a cost-cutting exercise. Once permanence in those forms is achieved, the state no longer has a duty towards those children or their carers.

Bill Esterson: I am glad that my hon. Friend raises the point about the cost element of recommending adoption and special guardianship orders rather than long-term fostering. That particularly applies for those aged 18 and above. In my speech I did not mention Staying Put or the fact that the funding for it is lower than for foster care. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a big mistake and a big impediment to ensuring that children who go into foster care are given the long-term permanence of being part of a family?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: It will come as no surprise to my hon. Friend that I completely agree. I am also a keen advocate of extending Staying Put to children in residential care. It cannot be right that there is a two-tier system where some children are treated differently simply because of their placement.
The recommendation is also symptomatic of the Government’s obsession with adoption as the gold standard, to the detriment of all other forms of care. We need a consistent, overall strategy for children in care under this current Government. Rather than seeing the holistic picture and attempting to address issues when they first arise, their piecemeal approach has led to separate and unaligned strategies around early intervention, children in need of help or protection, fostering and adoption.

Can the Minister confirm that he will robustly refute those recommendations? I respectfully remind him that full adoption comes with the severance of birth ties. He knows as well as I do that that is not always right for those children in long-term foster care who enjoy continued contact with their birth families throughout placement.

The report deeply disappointed again when it came to contact. It stated that the well-established presumption in favour of contact was removed by the Children and Families Act 2014. It was not. The presumption remains as enshrined in the Children Act 1989. I again make a plea to the Government for parity in legislation between siblings should be placed together as far as is “reasonably practicable”. This proposal, as with the false assertions about contact, is completely at odds with well-established practice and law, which is built on robust evidence.

I hope that the Minister will reject the recommendation that local authorities should not presume that siblings are best placed together. I acknowledge that it is not always appropriate, which is why the law states that siblings should be placed together as far as is “reasonably practicable”. This proposal, as with the false assertions about contact, is completely at odds with well-established practice and law, which is built on robust evidence.

The majority of organisations, charities, foster-carers and social workers are not only deeply concerned about some of the recommendations in the review, but disgusted by its shoddy nature. It makes assertions backed up with no evidence and at times contradicts existing research and evidence, which are coupled with an absence of children’s voices and a lack of understanding of the relevant legislation and policy in this field. Can the Minister advise when his counterpart will formally respond to the report, and will he pass on the request that, in doing so, he very seriously takes into account what has been said today and these misgivings, and ensures that our foster-carers and children are, once and for all, given the respect that they deserve?

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I remind him of the convention that the motion’s proposer has a short time to respond at the end of the debate.

10.39 am

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Thank you for the reminder, Mr Howarth. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) on securing this important debate and on a very powerful and informed opening speech. There have also been powerful speeches from the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), and a moving speech by the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law).

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak about the Government’s plans for foster care. The hon. Member for Sefton Central has taken an interest in the independent review of fostering from the outset, and he discussed its purpose and remit with the Department’s officials. I am glad we can revisit some of those concerns now the review has concluded.

In his excellent opening speech, the hon. Gentleman made an important point about educational outcomes for children in care, which is something that I, as Schools Minister, care deeply about. Of children in care, 17.5% achieved A to C grades in their English and maths GCSEs, compared with 58.8% of other children. The average attainment 8 score for children in care stands at about 22.8, compared with 48.1 for other children.

Alongside the independent review of fostering that the Department commissioned, the Education Committee conducted an inquiry into fostering. My hon. Friend the Minister for Children and Families is discussing the reports’ findings with the Committee at this very moment—obviously the right hand arranged that meeting, while the left hand arranged the timing of this debate. We are considering the recommendations set out in the independent review alongside those made by the Education Committee. I will set out the Government’s plans for a formal response to both reports, which we will publish in spring.

We recognise that not everyone will agree with the conclusions of the independent review, or of the Education Committee, but importantly, we have an opportunity to work together to improve the foster care system and to better support looked-after children and foster-parents. We cannot do that alone: not all the reports’ recommendations are for central Government. It is important that we work with local authorities, independent fostering agencies, foster-parents and, of course, young people themselves, as we develop and deliver the Government’s response.

The hon. Member for Sefton Central raised the issue of local government funding. He will be aware that the 2015 spending review made more than £200 billion available to local authorities for local services, including children’s services, up to 2019-20—the end of the spending review period. The Government will also provide additional council tax flexibilities in 2018-19 and 2019-20. Funding for children’s services is an un-ring-fenced part of the wider local government finance settlement, which gives local authorities the flexibility to focus on locally determined priorities and their statutory responsibilities. Local authorities have used that flexibility to increase spending on children’s and young people’s services to around £9.2 billion in 2015-16.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I appreciate that the Minister is not in his usual role. I asked the Minister for Children and Families a question yesterday that he was unable to answer, so I hope the Minister will be able to today. How does his Department square the circle with regard to local authority funding, when every other service that has an impact on children’s social care is being cut and completely depleted? Social work is a holistic profession; it relies on other services that are being stripped away, day by day, under this Government.

Nick Gibb: As I said, the spending review made more than £200 billion available to local authorities for local services throughout the review period. In addition, we have introduced greater flexibilities for local authorities to raise additional funds.
Mr Sheerman: The Minister gets out and about in the country, but has he been to children’s services in places such as Kirklees? In my time in Parliament, I have never seen such a crisis. We are in a ghastly situation where, because there is no money in local authorities—largely because of the time, money and resource that they are putting into care—money and resource is being taken away from our children, from child protection and from the fostering service. That is the truth, whether we like it or not.

Nick Gibb: The truth is that we have made £200 billion available for local authorities in the period up to 2019-20, as part of a balanced approach to public spending, to ensure we have a strong and stable economy that is delivering the lowest level of unemployment for more than 40 years. The Government have had to take difficult decisions in the last seven or eight years, but it is an important area of Government spending.

Our ambitions for children and young people, when they are being looked after and afterwards, are the same as for any other child. We want them to fulfil their educational potential, have good health and wellbeing, build and maintain lasting relationships, and participate positively in society. Of looked-after children, 74% are in foster care. Fostering provides stability, a safe and loving home and an alternative family environment. Children and young people in foster care have made it clear that they want to feel part of a family and have a normal life.

One of the essential messages from the “Foster Care in England” report is that foster care is working for many vulnerable children and young people. That needs to be celebrated. Research tells us that, for many children in foster care, the experience can be positive and life-changing. Coram’s “Our Lives, Our Care” survey found that, in 2017, 83% of 11 to 18-year-olds living in care thought their life was getting better. Research from the Rees Centre showed that stable, high-quality care can be a protective factor educationally, and children and young people in foster care perform better at school than looked-after children as a whole, and better than looked-after children as a whole, and better than children in need.

The “Foster Care in England” report draws on the evidence of children and young people, foster-careers, social workers, fostering organisations and academics to set out a broad programme of possible improvements. It is clear from both reports, and from today’s debate, that we could and should do more to improve children’s experiences of foster care.

Chris Law: In the writing of those two reports, how many young people did we have conversations with, listen to or take constructive feedback from on the reports’ conclusions?

Nick Gibb: Young people were consulted, but I will get back to the hon. Gentleman on the precise number involved in the consultation.

Although there are areas of disagreement, there are three common themes. First, we need to ensure that enough high-quality fostering placements are available in the right place at the right time to meet the needs of children in the care system. Secondly, we need to ensure that foster-parents receive the support and respect they need and deserve for the incredibly valuable role that they play in looking after children in care. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, we need to ensure that children and young people are listened to, that their wishes and feelings are taken into account, and that they are involved in decisions about their lives.

The hon. Member for Sefton Central also raised the issue of adoption. Stability and permanence are transformative for many children. For some children, long-term foster care will be the right choice. It is one of a range of options that includes adoptions and special guardianship, as he mentioned. The independent review asks the Department to put permanence at the heart of policy making, and we agree that that is the right thing to do.

Foster-parents play a vital role in supporting some of our most vulnerable children. They are essential for achieving high ambitions for the children in their care. They are uniquely placed to recognise the child’s needs and to respond to them appropriately. However, some foster-parents feel frustrated by the treatment they receive. We need to ensure that all foster-parents receive the support and respect they need for the incredibly valuable role that they play. The two fostering reports are clear that foster-parents are the experts in the children they look after and should be recognised as such. The statutory framework sets out that foster-parents should be listened to and included in decisions about the child’s care, but the evidence suggests that that does not always happen.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I am not sure whether I heard the Minister correctly. Did he say that the Department puts permanence at the heart of everything it does? Does that not deny the wishes of children who want to go into residential care, long-term foster care or other forms of care? Why is the Department riding roughshod over the views of some children?

Nick Gibb: That is not what I implied by what I said, which was that permanence was at the heart of policy making. Of course the views and rights of children are paramount in all the decisions that are made. The best interests of children will drive decision making for them.

We need to consider how foster-parents can be better supported so that they feel valued and empowered to parent the children in their care. For example, the independent review highlighted the need for greater delegation of day-to-day decision making. We will explore with the sector how we can improve guidance and practice.

Government policy is very clear that no foster-parent should be out of pocket because they are looking after a child. The Government set the national minimum allowance, and we are clear that we expect all foster-parents to receive at least that sum, but we need a better understanding of the national picture on remuneration. We will consider financial support alongside the wider package of support to ensure that foster-parents can continue to fulfil their valuable role.

The hon. Member for Sefton Central mentioned the professionalism and expertise of foster-parents. He is right that they should be treated professionally. He also mentioned the proposal for a national register of foster-careers. We are considering that recommendation. It is clear from both reports that more strategic sufficiency planning would help to secure better matches for
more children. Some form of register may help to improve referrals, because it is hard to get a real-time picture of foster-parent availability. It is essential that we do not lose the insight from social workers in individual cases or the personal interactions in making placements.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden raised the faith background of foster-parents. The Government welcome anyone of any religion or ethnicity who comes forward to foster, provided that they meet the needs of children. However, she is right to raise the issue. We have heard and noted her concerns about faith literacy. We will consider how training can be improved for social workers and foster-parents in faith literacy and other matters. There are a number of misunderstandings about fostering in general, including about who can foster. The Government’s response to the reports will provide an opportunity to address the issues that she rightly raises.

The hon. Member for Wigan raised the issue of foster-carers’ 30 hours of free childcare. The child’s best interests have to be the paramount consideration. We are working with local authorities, and where childcare is in the child’s best interests, we expect it to continue even if they move to another placement. The hon. Lady also expressed concern about the high number of placements out of area. At the end of March 2017, 60% of children in foster care had been placed outside their council boundary and 80% within 20 miles of their home. However, the national availability of foster-carers does not always reflect local need. Local authorities have a duty to ensure the availability of foster-parents. The Government are working out how we can support councils to fulfil that duty.

The hon. Lady also raised the important issue of the voice of the child. The survey of children and young people by the Children’s Commissioner heard how important it was for young people to feel listened to and to have a greater role in decisions made about their lives. Several said that they felt that they did not have a say in anything and found that foster-carers and social workers dominated decisions about their placement. It is clear that the whole system needs to be better at listening and responding to the views of children and young people in its care. We are determined that children and young people have opportunities to contribute to the development of the Government’s response to the two fostering reports, so they are being supported by external organisations who have the necessary expertise.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Sefton Central for this opportunity to continue debating the important issue of fostering. The independent review, the Education Committee and the many organisations and people who have contributed to the reports have given us a real opportunity to develop policy further and make a sustained change to the outcomes of children in care. The points raised today continue our important debate, and I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. As we develop our future work programme on fostering, we will continue to listen and work with all those who have an interest—not least young people themselves.

Chris Law: I am listening to the Minister with great interest, but I am astonished and appalled that he has not once mentioned the work done in Scotland, which has devolved responsibility in the matter. Is this not a perfect opportunity for Administrations to learn from each other’s experiences and draw the best conclusions? He has not even referred to the Scottish Government’s good works that I spoke about or the reports that we have been doing north of the border. And whatever he says, the idea of our working as a family of nations has clearly been totally disregarded. Will he please address it now and say that he will consider it and take it forward?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We will do just that.

Let me make a final point in the time available. The Government’s priority is that any changes must make a positive difference to the lives of the 53,000 children and young people who live in foster-families, and to the lives of foster-parents. We are committed to ensuring that vulnerable children have access to the best possible care to help them to thrive and prepare them for adulthood.
expect. But the Minister needs to listen to those children, to their foster-carers, to the professionals who have lobbied for this debate and to those who gave evidence to the Select Committee inquiry and the stocktake. It is short-sighted and short-termist to do anything less than ensure that intervention is possible. It is failing the children and young people who need all our support.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
John Howell (Henley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend very much for giving way in this important debate. What is his opinion on sonic collars, because they have a different function but should also probably be banned?

Ross Thomson: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. One of the things that I have learned throughout this whole campaign is the range of different devices that are available. Across the world, there are hundreds of different devices using different techniques, whether that is vibrations or shocks, to administer some form of treatment for a behaviour that is unwanted. Therefore, the consultation that has been announced is very broad, which is why I encourage Members here, as well as members of the public and all sorts of organisations and charities, to make their views known on exactly this issue and these kinds of devices.

I welcome the swift action that has been taken in Wales to ban the use of electric shock collars and I also welcome the intention of the Scottish Government to ban their use, but if we really want to eradicate them, banning them from the sale as well as the use of these devices has been left out of the consultation that was announced this week, and to encourage the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to include the sale of electric shock dog collars. We can prohibit their distribution of these collars. We can prohibit their sale to submit their views to the consultation. In fact, I hope that all animal lovers will take the opportunity to engage in the upcoming consultation and make their feelings clear.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this matter forward and on supporting the Secretary of State in his endeavour. However, he has just touched on a point about the extent of this sort of legislation. In Northern Ireland, we currently do not have a democratic institution that could pass a legislative consent motion, for example. I am interested in hearing his views as to whether this process should extend to Scotland and Northern Ireland, and I invite the Minister to confirm whether that will be the case.

Ross Thomson: I wish to make it clear that if we are to tackle the issue of electric shock collars and properly ban their use, it has to happen right across our United Kingdom, and only this Parliament can stop the sale and distribution of these collars. We can prohibit their use, but if we really want to eradicating them, banning their sale and distribution is key. And I hope that the Minister will pick up on the point that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. A number of other Members and I applied for a similar debate, but he had better dice than us in the selection. However, it is important to recognise that he has widespread support across this House and across parties for the points that he is making. I wonder whether he would agree to ask the Minister, in the gentlest terms possible, to explain why the whole matter of the sale of these devices has been left out of the consultation that was announced this week, and to encourage the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to include the sale in that consultation.

Ross Thomson: I genuinely thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is absolutely right that we have had cross-party support on this issue. I am glad that the Government are taking action, because right across the Chamber and regardless of party colour, there is real support for action on this issue. The hon. Gentleman’s intervention is very timely—

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP) rose—

Ross Thomson: I will take another intervention, but first I will respond to the intervention from the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). I was about to discuss what has been suggested regarding the consultation since it was launched at the weekend—namely, that the Government are not seeking to ban the sale of these devices. My understanding is that that is wrong, because the consultation document itself says that the consultation is seeking views and calling for evidence on the sale of electric shock dog collars, as well as views and evidence on their use. I will quote the consultation document directly, which says that the Government “want to hear views about what these proposals will mean for the sale and retailers of e-collars and whether any further restrictions will be required”.

I have made it clear from the outset that I would only ever welcome a Government proposal for a ban if it applied to the sale as well as the use of these devices. So, yes, I ask the Minister to confirm that it is the intention of the Government to seek a ban that covers the sale and use of these devices, and I call on those colleagues who are just as passionate as I am about banning their sale to submit their views to the consultation. In fact, I hope that all animal lovers will take the opportunity to engage in the upcoming consultation and make their feelings clear.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and I am also grateful to him for securing this very important debate. My parents have been training dogs—working dogs—for the best part of 30 years, and they have never felt the need to use these barbaric devices. My parents are good trainers and understand dogs very well. Does my hon. Friend agree with the recommendation from the Kennel Club that a ban should be rolled out across the country?

Ross Thomson: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. What he highlights is some of the anecdotal evidence that has come through this campaign from people who are dog behaviourists and trainers, and who have seen the effects of the use of shock collars and how detrimental they can be. I absolutely agree with him, and with the Kennel Club recommendations, that whatever we do must happen right across the country.

Dr Cameron: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this extremely important debate. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on dog advisory welfare, I have been inundated by people contacting me from right across the United Kingdom to give their support for this campaign. I wanted to let him know about that. Also, given his passion for this subject, I wanted to ask him to consider joining the all-party group and working collaboratively on this issue and other issues, such as Lucy’s law.

Ross Thomson: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She is absolutely right that there has been huge support from the public on this issue, and no doubt many of our inboxes are filled with emails about it from constituents and from others right across the country who care just as much as we do about animal welfare and driving up animal welfare standards. I congratulate her on all the
work that she has done with the all-party group. I would be absolutely delighted to join it and support it in any work that it is seeking to do, because she is right that dog welfare does not just end with banning shock collars; there is an awful lot more to do, and introducing Lucy’s law is absolutely one of those things.

In the run-up to this debate, members of the public were invited to post and share their views about banning shock collars on the House of Commons Facebook page. The response to that invitation has been quite amazing and the comments are still coming in, so I thank everyone who took the time to share their thoughts. The majority of respondents believe that shock collars are not necessary to train dogs, and I will share with Members a couple of the comments. Deb said:

“There is no justification for training animals using pain, rather than reward and building trust. It is not only cruel. It risks creating behavioural issues in the short or long term that could be a risk to humans. Ban the shock collars. It’s overdue.”

Karen said:

“They need to be banned. It is a cruel and inhumane form of torture and abuse. If it isn’t suitable to use on your human child then it shouldn’t be suitable to use on a pet.”

Bill said:

“If you love your dog why would you want to give them an electric shock? Why not spend time with them training them?”

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this important debate to us today. As he has just touched on, persuasion is always better than aversion. What we have is a sentient dog that is potentially living in fear, not knowing where the next shock is coming from. We must stop that cruelty as soon as we can. We must bring the ban forward and expand it, rather than just rolling on endlessly, given the time it takes to get through these things through Parliament.

Ross Thomson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. All the evidence from experts in dog training shows that when an electric shock is administered, the dog does not understand why it has received that shock. When using these collars, owners have to be incredibly precise with the timing, otherwise it can result in even more detrimental behaviour, rather than correcting the behaviour someone is seeking to change. I will come on to that, because there is worrying anecdotal evidence about cases in which people have got that wrong and what that means for the welfare of the dog.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): My hon. Friend will agree that for generations, guide dogs, sheepdogs, hearing dogs, police dogs, mountain rescue dogs and, indeed, domestic pets have been trained very successfully without the barbaric use of electric collars. Does he agree that the vast majority of the British public would aim for one outcome: a ban on the use of such collars and, equally importantly, a ban on the sale of the devices in the United Kingdom?

Ross Thomson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: there are many different positive, reward-based training techniques out there to train our dogs. Guide dogs are one of the greatest examples. People do not have to electrocute guide dogs to get them to carry out the marvellous, wonderful things they do. I experienced it for myself when I went out in my constituency blindfolded and with a guide dog. They are incredibly intelligent and they save people’s lives. People do not need to electrocute them to do so. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we are going to do this properly, we need to ban the sale and use of these devices.

Since launching the campaign, many people have been astonished that these so-called training devices are still so prevalent when there have been significant advances in positive, reward-based training. I recently met the Kennel Club and the Dogs Trust with the Secretary of State, and we made that case forcefully. The Secretary of State was struck that such devices of torture are still available. Although I welcome the announcement of a consultation by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, it is clear that the campaign cannot and should not end there. We need to continue to make the argument that someone does not have to own a pet to understand that an electric shock collar is cruel and unnecessary. They are openly marketed and sold as training aids, and they work by instilling in the animal a fear of punishment.

When fitted, shock collars deliver an electric shock either through a remote control or an automatic trigger such as a dog’s bark. The punishment can last for up to 11 seconds. In some devices, the punishment can last as long as the owner holds down the button on the remote. The theory is that having received a shock the dog is more likely to do what it is asked, rather than that coming from a natural willingness to obey. Research commissioned by DEFRA showed that one in four dogs subjected to shock collars showed signs of stress compared with less than 5% who were trained by more positive methods. It was found that one third of dogs yelped when they felt a shock, and a further quarter yelped again when the punishment was repeated. The research also found that even when used by professionals, there were still long-term impacts on dog welfare.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time. I congratulate him not only on securing this debate, but on the campaign he has been running so successfully over the past weeks and months. To declare an interest, I was lucky enough to prosecute animal cruelty cases at the Bar and to work for some time in the animal sphere with regards to the law. In that context, I came across and worked with a lot of animal behaviour experts. Perhaps he will discuss this in due course, but does he agree that canine behaviour is incredibly complex? That has become apparent to me. He has painted a vivid picture of the distress caused to animals by these barbaric devices, but in addition, does he agree that they simply do not work? They are counterproductive, given the complexity of dog behaviour and dog society.

Ross Thomson: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. His intervention comes at a timely point. He talked about his experience prosecuting animal cruelty cases. He mentioned how it can be complicated to time when the shocks should be given. The dog might not understand, and that can create unwanted behaviour. When I met the members of the Kennel Club and the Dogs Trust, they raised that very concern. Owners of the devices often do not get the timing right, and that leads to unwanted behaviour.
There is a dangerous dogs case that is cited. Ostarra Langridge was prosecuted in 2001 when one of her dogs attacked and killed another dog while on a walk. A control order was imposed on Miss Langridge’s dog because of its aggressive behaviour, which was attributable to the effects of the shock collar. Miss Langridge sought the help of a behaviourist when her dogs started to run away from her on their walks along the beach. The dogs were given shock collars, which Miss Langridge was told to keep on for three months and activate whenever they misbehaved, but the first time the dogs got a shock was by mistake, after a small dog they were walking past made Miss Langridge jump. From then on her pets associated the shocks with small dogs and became afraid of them. When Miss Langridge described the day in July that her dogs turned on a shih tzu, she had tears in her eyes. She stated:

“They connected the pain of the electric shock with little dogs because of the first time I used the collar. The day that machine came in this house I regret.”

There should be no place for this type of outdated practice, particularly given the recent advances in positive, reward-based training. In my view, it is not enough to simply tighten up regulations. We need to outlaw these devices altogether as soon as possible.

11.17 am

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) on securing this debate on the use, sale and distribution of e-collars. As he pointed out, this is a timely debate, given the Government’s announcement only three days ago that we are seeking public consultation on the use of e-collars in England. A public consultation provides people with the opportunity to express their views on the use of e-collars. They have until 27 April to respond to the consultation, which can be found via the gov.uk website.

I begin by commending the campaigning work that my hon. Friend has done recently on this issue. He has raised it many times and has met the Secretary of State to discuss it. I also take the opportunity to pay tribute to the long-standing work in this area by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South. The point is because it was one the key points made by my hon. Friend for Hendon (Dr Offord). As long ago as 2014, he introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to ban e-collars. He has been a long-standing campaigner on these issues. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South pointed out, many people are opposed to the use of e-collars for dogs and cats. That opposition includes many of the animal welfare and veterinary organisations, such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Dogs Trust, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Blue Cross, the People’s Dispensary for Sick Animals, the Kennel Club and the British Veterinary Association.

While we have signalled through the consultation our intention to act and introduce legislation, it is important to remember that in the meantime it is already an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to an animal. The maximum penalty is currently six months’ imprisonment, an unlimited fine or both. We have already announced that we will increase the maximum penalty to five years’ imprisonment, a fine or both. If anyone considers that someone has caused an animal unnecessary suffering by the use of an e-collar, they should report it to the relevant local authority, which has powers to investigate such allegations under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Alternatively, they can report it to the RSPCA, which will also investigate.

The Government previously considered that e-collars should be used only as a last resort, when more conventional forms of positive reward training had failed. We also encouraged owners of such devices to read and follow the manufacturers’ instructions. However, we suspect that people are taking shortcuts, thinking that an e-collar might save them money in the long run, as they would not have to commit to a series of training courses for their dog. We think it is wrong for people to conclude that a simple hand-held device that emits a static pulse is all they need to correct their dog’s behaviour. As veterinarians, behaviourists, trainers and welfare organisations all tell us, it is not that simple.

Tommy Sheppard: Can the Minister be clear on whether the Government intend to review the legislation relating to the sale of such devices? He said that the consultation is about their use in England, but as the hon. Member for Aberdeen South pointed out, many people are opposed to the use of e-collars for dogs and cats. That opposition includes many of the animal welfare and veterinary organisations, such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Kennel Club and the British Veterinary Association.

George Eustice: I was going to come to that later, because it was one the key points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South. The point is because it was one the key points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South. The point is that the consultation leaves open that option; we are suggesting a ban on use, but we also invite views on whether that would be sufficient, or whether we should consider a wider ban. I will say a little more on that later, but first I want to describe some of the context.

In 2014, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs funded research on the use of e-collars on dogs. I stress that that research was restricted to remote hand-held devices, rather than containment fences for both cats and dogs. The research concluded that e-collars have a detrimental effect on the welfare of dogs in some cases. People need to be aware that an e-collar is by no means an easy answer to a problem. Indeed, using an e-collar may have a long-term, detrimental effect on the welfare of a beloved pet. In such circumstances, an owner could be in breach of the Animal Welfare Act 2006, leaving themselves open to prosecution.

At the time of the 2014 research—I was in the Department at the time—the Government stopped short of recommending an outright ban, for a number of reasons. Given that we were approaching a general election—frankly, since then we have all had lots of enjoyable referendums and elections that have distracted us from our duty in this place—we decided that it would be quicker to include some references in the updated dog welfare code. I pressed for that in 2015 with officials, having had representations from my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon, and those additions went into the updated dog welfare code that is currently under consideration. However, if we want it to be enforceable, and if we want clarity in the law, the Government are currently of the view that going a step further and simply banning the devices would probably give that clarity.
The difficulty with having codes that say that such devices should be used as a last resort, or that include comments that basically strengthen a presumption against the use of negative training devices, is that there is always a difficulty with enforcement. That is why, notwithstanding the position that we took then, now that we have a clear run in Parliament to address such issues without the constant distraction of forthcoming elections, it is right that we have a consultation and call for evidence, and consider going further.

As we make clear in the consultation, we want to promote the positive training of dogs. We do not consider that dogs should be subject to negative forms of training, particularly when positive methods can have such beneficial effects. There are some very good trainers out there whom people can approach about the behaviour of their dogs, and who are used to all sorts of challenges with regard to disobedient dogs. We want owners to use positive training methods as much as possible.

I have heard many arguments about individual experiences of using e-collars. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South outlined some of the anecdotes that he has received. I have heard anecdotes on both sides. There are often-quoted reactions to e-collars, such as people using the hand-held devices at the strongest setting on the first use. Another example that we have had drawn to our attention relates to containment fences. When dogs chase something beyond the boundary line, they are often too scared to return. I have also heard stories of dogs that might not be alive today were it not for e-collars, particularly when it comes to those boundary fences. The consultation provides supporters of e-collars and opponents of such devices an opportunity to express their views on the issue.

Turning to some of the specific points that have been made, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South referred to the sale of the devices. I can confirm that the consultation is open to evidence on that. We have made a specific proposal on banning the use of e-collars, because that is the approach that has been taken successfully in Wales and other countries such as Denmark and Germany. I was not intending to dwell on EU law in this debate, because obviously we have lots of debates on that in this place. However, there are potentially complexities and difficulties, partly linked to single market legislation, that could make it more difficult for us to introduce a ban on sale while we are a member of the European Union. Nevertheless, in our call for evidence and in our consultation we remain open to representations on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) raised the specific issue of sonic collars. I can confirm that the proposal covers all such electronic devices—not just shock collars, but those that emit noxious liquids or painful sonic signals. My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) referred to his impatience to get on with it. As somebody who has been quite sympathetic to taking further action in this area since 2014, I can tell him that patience is a virtue in this House. The reality is that if we want to introduce a ban of this nature, the first step has to be a consultation and a genuine debate and discussion, giving people the opportunity to express their views. I am afraid we cannot introduce a ban without getting to the point of legislation. I hope that he will recognise that the Government have acted in this area. We have made it clear that we are publishing a consultation and inviting views, which is the crucial first step to making progress in this area.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) made a very important point, which in my mind goes to the heart of the debate. He talked about the complexity of canine behaviour, and the fact that dogs can associate the shock with something else in their immediate environment. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South gave the anecdote of dogs that associated the shock with the first time that they received it, and with small dogs that were in the vicinity. I always remember my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon, at the time of his ten-minute rule Bill, giving a powerful case of a dog that had associated the shock with small children, because the shock collar had been used when children were in the area. It is clearly very damaging to confuse dogs and cause them to have concerns about small children. That could have completely unintended consequences from which we cannot row back.

In conclusion, we have had a very interesting debate, with lots of important interventions.

Gavin Robinson: I asked a specific question about the extent of proposals. Can the Minister confirm that he will look carefully and kindly on the idea of the legislation, if it is introduced, extending across the entire United Kingdom?

George Eustice: Yes. I may have given the impression that I was avoiding the point that the hon. Gentleman raised earlier. The consultation is specifically for England because it is a devolved matter at the moment. Wales introduced a similar ban—I think as long ago as 2010, from memory. I understand that the Scottish Government are consulting on something similar. Our consultation addresses England, but I am conscious of the particular issue that we have in Northern Ireland at the moment, without an Administration in place. I will happily consider the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion, but I hope that he will understand that we would not want to violate the devolved settlement that we have on the issue of animal welfare.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
Women and Work

[SIR DAVID CRAUSBY in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered women and work.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. May I address you as Sir David? What is your preference?

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): You can. My friends don’t have to, but I think they should.

Rachel Maclean: Thank you for that clarification.

Women make up half the population but, for many years, less than half the workforce. The key to female empowerment is economic independence, which is what this debate is about.

Hon. Members will know that it is only comparatively recently that women were accepted in the workplace. When I was growing up, my mum was unusual, because she worked outside the home as a GP. I had to let myself into the house when I came back from school and make my own meals, which forced me to become independent from an early age. I learned great life skills, including how to make a quick, nutritious meal for my sister and myself, as well as how to climb over garden fences and through bedroom windows when I lost my door key, which happened quite regularly. I hasten to add—I am sure hon. Members will be pleased to know—that that is not a skill I have used regularly since that time.

We women have made great strides in society from the days when it was completely normal to say that a woman’s place was in the home, or we had to give up our careers when we became pregnant, or we were forced out due to attitudes and outdated policies or the unwelcoming culture of the workplace. In my very first job after university, in a large high street bank, I was the only woman recruited into my job role, at the age of 22. I remember when I was called into the top boss’s office and was asked what they should write in a maternity policy if I became pregnant. They had never had a female employee in that role, let alone anyone with a baby. How times have changed. Those incidents date me even from the kitchen table, but from the downstairs toilet.

Women cannot achieve their potential in society, in the workplace or in the family without independent resources of their own. That is why women and work is a critically important subject and why I have called this debate. I pay tribute to the progress made under previous Governments of all colours to open up the workplace to women. It has been a long journey. Although I accept that there is always more that we can do, I will touch on a few key themes and highlight the major progress that this Conservative Government have made.

As Conservatives, we believe in helping everyone, male or female, achieve their potential. I am proud of the progress that we have made since 2010. Some 15.1 million women in the UK aged 16 and over were working in December 2017, which is 1.48 million higher than a decade ago. That represents a record high employment rate of 70.8%, and results in the smallest gap between male and female employment rates, of just under nine percentage points, since comparable records began in 1971. As we would probably expect given that it is still the norm for women to take on the bulk of caring responsibilities in the family, women are more likely than men to be working part time, but I note that, since 2014, the growth in full-time employment for women has outpaced that of men.

Why does this matter? There is a massive evidence base that diverse teams that include men and women equally perform better. This is not just about doing something to benefit women. It is about action that benefits men and the whole of society. The evidence is overwhelming. Study after study, report after report, demonstrate beyond all doubt that diverse teams overcome groupthink, problem-solve more effectively and build better teams.

What have the Government done to encourage women into the workplace? One critical factor is being able to work flexibly or to stay in work when the alternative would be to give up work, which is very good news for individual employees and their employers, and good news for the economy. Under the Conservatives, I welcome the fact that working patterns are becoming increasingly flexible.

In the three months to August 2016, 23.2 million people were working full time—362,000 more than a year earlier. There were 8.6 million people working part time—198,000 more than a year earlier. Based on 2011 data, around 60% of employees had done some form of flexible working in the previous year, up from 56% in 2006. There is no doubt that the extension of the right to request flexible working has doubled the number of employees who are able to make a request, to more than 20 million. The former business Department—the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills—estimated that that would lead to a further 80,000 requests a year, which has led to 60,000 new working arrangements a year.

Let us pause for a moment to consider what that means in a woman’s life. It means that a woman is able to have control over her work-life balance and take on the responsibilities she may face, whether that is caring for children or for elderly relatives, yet still contribute to the workplace without being discriminated against.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I am very pleased that my hon. Friend has been able to secure this important debate and I am pleased to be here. I agree that having women in the workplace is not just good for women. It is also good for men. I pay personal tribute to the fact that my hon. Friend embodies that maxim through her contributions to parliamentary business. She touched elegantly on her personal experience and mentioned her mother. In terms of what drew her into having a working career, was there a particular role model? Does she think that role models in general are a critical factor in bringing women into the workplace?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for that well-considered question. He touches on the reason I requested this debate. I have a number of personal role models, the greatest of whom is my sadly departed mother-in-law, Margaret Maclean. She was a fantastic example of a woman who started her own business—not even from the kitchen table, but from the downstairs toilet.
Many times we have been in her toilet packing up boxes of books for her book distribution business. I learned the value of hard work and never having a day off. I recognise that she did that and raised her three children, one of whom is still my husband, I am pleased to say.

We have seen in the Government’s recent industrial strategy that they are committed to continue to work with businesses to make flexible working a reality for all employees across Britain and to inform the evaluation of the right to request flexible working regulations. We all know that some barriers remain to requesting flexible working. I worked in businesses for 25 years before I entered the House and I know that there are barriers for women. It is only by making overwhelming change in the culture of business and society that it will become the norm to request and to grant flexible working to women and men with caring responsibilities. It is really good news for women when forward-thinking businesses are able to have a dialogue with their staff and accommodate the reality of our lives. Of course, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) said, men also benefit from that, along with the whole family.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does she agree that apprenticeships are a very good way of allowing women and girls to achieve, progress and reach their full potential in the workplace by working flexibly? I declare an interest as chair of the apprenticeship diversity champions network.

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, because it draws attention to the statistics on women and apprenticeships. Women account for the majority of apprenticeship starts in recent years—53.4% in 2016-17 and 52.8% in 2015-16. That has risen year on year under this Government, and is no doubt a tribute to the work that she is doing in championing diversity and apprenticeships in the workplace. I thank her very much for that.

Having women in the workplace is very good news for men and the culture of businesses as a whole because it encourages a more dynamic, progressive and modern workplace. When the Minister responds, will he touch on the uptake of shared parental leave, which is a fantastic policy supported by this Government and previous Governments? What more can the Government do to encourage more employers to take it up? I declare an interest as chair of the apprenticeship diversity champions network.

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coaching to ease the transition back into the workplace. Such practices should become the norm, not the exception. By constantly talking about the importance of such issues in this place, I hope we send out the signal that the world of work has changed and will change in the future. A woman can be just as effective working from home, with a managed team and open and honest communication with her team.

When I recruited staff for very senior management positions in the business I ran, I never hesitated to recruit mothers, women with children, or even dads who wanted to work part time or school hours. That is unusual in many businesses, but I knew that they would be perfectly able to manage by using technology and virtual methods of communication to overcome the barriers of not being present. They do not need to sit at a desk to be effective. I knew that, although they were not physically present every moment of the day, their brains would be working on business problems, even while they were taking care of their children, doing the school run, preparing meals or doing the laundry. If you want anything doing, ask a busy person—especially a mother or a father who is up against a deadline to collect a child. I guarantee that they will get the job done.

The Government are supporting hard-working women and businesses in this country. I welcome the fact that in the 2017 spring Budget the Government committed £5 million to support people who would like to return to paid work after spending time caring for others. That funding will help to unlock the potential and benefits of work for those individuals, employers and the economy. Some 2.1 million people, nearly 90% of whom are women, are currently out of the labour market because they are looking after their home or caring for family members, so we can see how important that agenda is. More and more businesses are joining the fight and making this a boardroom issue. Change will come only when directors step up and lead, and put their money and resources where their mouth is. I call on them to acknowledge the reality of the world of work for women today.

I want to touch on the Taylor review, of which I have experience, because I was a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee for a short period. The Government are listening to and acting on the concerns raised in that important review, which looked at the world of work and recommended measures to protect all workers in our economy, including the gig economy, from being exploited. Many women work in lower-paid sectors of the economy, and they are just as entitled to good working conditions, which is why I welcome the Government’s action on this issue. There is more to come.

Working is good for women. It is not just an economic proposition; it is a chance for a woman to make the most of her potential and contribute her talents. There are many other upsides, including a real impact on her health and wellbeing. The fact that being in work has a positive impact on mental health is not talked about enough. In doing research for this speech, I uncovered statistics that indicate that women who work are less likely to be depressed, to live in poverty, to be in a violent relationship or be a victim of domestic abuse, to suffer substance abuse, or to experience family breakdown. They are more likely to live a balanced, happy life. They are also less likely to be offenders or be in prison. If a woman has children and is working, the children are more likely to grow up in a stable home with a stable experience. They are more likely to achieve academically, and are less likely to have mental health problems.

The issue of women and work touches all our lives, businesses and families, which is why I welcome Government action on it. Thank you for allowing me the time to have this debate, Sir David. I hope hon. Members agree that if a woman can work, earn and achieve in her own right, nothing can stop her and the world is her oyster.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. I intend to call the first of the three Front Benchers at 3.30 pm. A number of Members have indicated that they want to speak, so if Members can keep their contributions to about five minutes, I think they will all get in.

2.49 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing the debate and setting the scene so very well. I will give some stats, then some information about my own office and where I stand.

In the period October to December 2017 in the UK, 15.1 million women aged 16 and over were in employment. The employment rate was 70.8% for women, compared with 79.7% for men; 8.8 million women were working full time and 6.3 million part time; and 42% of women in employment were working part time compared with 13% of men—so part-time work for women is far above the norm elsewhere.

The most common sectors of employment for women are health and social work, accounting for 20% of all jobs held by women at September 2017; wholesale and retail, 14%; and education, 12%. Around 78% of jobs in the health and social work sector and 70% of jobs in the education sector were held by women. Around 20% of small and medium-sized enterprises with employees were led by women, and it is good to see that happening. As the hon. Member for Redditch, as a former employer, said, there is a lot more that we can do to encourage that, and I look to the Minister for his thoughts.

Men are more likely than women to be involved in total early-stage entrepreneurial activity, which includes owning or running a business less than 3.5 years old. At February 2018, 29% of directors of FTSE 100 companies were women and at the next stage down, in the FTSE 250, 23% of directors were women.

In 2010 I was elected here, my wife came over and she got a wee fridge magnet. It was a famous quote from Margaret Thatcher, which we all know: “If you want something said, ask a woman; if you want something done, ask a man.” My wife put that on the fridge for a purpose—I am wondering whether there is a message there that she is trying to tell me—and I am reminded of it every day because it is still there.

The contribution of working women is incredible when added to the fact that many have main care of their children and also run their household—that is something that has to be recognised. As a proud employer of six staff, I must highlight that five of the six are women. One is a lady in her 50s with her children raised who works part time and minds her grandchildren part
time, and for whom I provide flexible working. A lady in her 40s with her children mostly grown works full time for me, and another in her 40s works part time. Another lady, in her 30s, with a two-year-old and a three-year-old, works full time doing my speeches and press—as I am sure hon. Members know, I keep her very busy on speeches, and she does a lot of overtime. On her return home, it is not unknown for her to email documentation and speeches to me for the next day at 12.30 in the morning. That is the sort of person she is, and she does it because I have given her flexible hours and she likes doing it. I do not press her about anything, letting her do it as she sees fit. A girl in her 20s also works for me four days a week.

I therefore have a staff with different ages, from different backgrounds and at different stages of their lives, and yet one similar purpose links them all together—not just my office—which is that they wish to work, and work very hard. That is what they do. I might well have lost one of my best workers when my parliamentary aide had two maternity leaves within one year, but we had the discussion of how to make changes to make things happen so that she could be a great mother and still be great in her job. I made it clear that I was willing to work with her to make it work. She has been back at work for more than a year, but I have learned that family comes first—I always believed that anyway—and that she is more than capable of holding everything together. I did not penalise her for her maternity leave, but became flexible to ensure that I did not lose a great worker.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the barriers to promoting women’s full contribution in the world of work is the sufficient supply of quality childcare?

Jim Shannon: I am glad the hon. Lady mentioned that, because childcare is very important. For many ladies in my constituency, the availability of and access to childcare mean that they are able to work.

I have another great example of a working women in my mother. She is at pains to let us know—my mother tells this story about when I was born, which was a long time ago—that she was in the shop working again within 48 hours of giving birth. My mother must be a very strong lady. We owned a shop and she worked beside my dad every day. She ran our home and the shop, she helped in the church, and she regimented us with the ability of a sergeant-major or indeed a general, but at the same time she gave us a wonderful example of love and care.

I pay my staff the same wage whether they are men or women. Sadly, however, somewhere along the line as a society some people determined that it is acceptable to pay different wages for the same job, due not to job performance or ability, but to gender. I want to say clearly: that is unacceptable to me. I want to see the same wages for men and for women, so let us say that together and get it right.

Yes, there is the potential for a member of staff to take maternity leave or request flexible working hours to suit a family when they are female, but in today’s society men are just as able and willing to take care of their children, and rightly so. The gender pay gap does not simply apply in the BBC or Hollywood; we see it day in and day out, and it is not right. I would take great exception to anyone who decided that my granddaughters were worth less because they are girls—they are strong, bright, courageous and ready to take on the world, and in this day and age they should be allowed to do so without discrimination, based on their ability and not solely on their gender. That is the way that it should and must be, and we have a role to play. I am willing, as the Member of Parliament for Strangford, to do my bit to make that happen.

2.55 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing this debate, which is so timely, as we have recently passed the milestone of 15 million women in work, with the south-west tying with the south-east for having the highest proportion.

I want to briefly give my two-pennyworth. I believe in opportunities and equality, and it is important to note that if women choose not to work and have the means to support themselves, that is their choice, and one that I respect as well. Many do that to look after their children. The important thing, however, is to ensure that they have the choice and that there is a level playing field. That is why the 30-hour free childcare policy is such a massive step forward, empowering and enabling women to be able to afford to work, and making work pay.

The 15-hour policy rolled out in 2010 helped 93% of three-year-olds and 96% of four-year-olds, and now hundreds of thousands of parents across the country benefit from the increase to 30 hours, which enables and incentivises people to work. I am proud that the Government made that a priority. In fact, by 2019-20 we will be spending a record of about £6 billion on childcare support. We have also invested in supporting women back into work, which is crucial. In the 2017 spring Budget, we committed £5 million to support people who would like to return to paid work after time spent caring for others.

The introduction of shared parental leave in 2015 was an egalitarian move to enable women and men to share leave. I am delighted that the Government are investing money and resource into promoting that scheme. I look forward to hearing from the Minister more about the awareness campaign. I also call on him to recognise and celebrate those companies that offer at least an element of shared corporate parental leave, which is a true step forward towards equality and choice, and one that will help to tackle the gender pay gap. I am keen to know his thoughts. For my part, I believe that fully shared corporate parental leave is the future. We should look at countries such as Iceland for a model. I know its system is very different and based on individual benefits for parental leave, but it provides a starting block and something to build on to truly have equality.

The number of women on FTSE 350 boards has doubled since 2011, and there are no longer any male-only boards in the FTSE 100, which I am proud of, but we still need to go further. I do not agree with demeaning quotas or positive discrimination, and I am not a fan of singling out particular groups. In fact, I believe that further segregation can cause discrimination. Instead, I believe...
in empowering and encouraging women and all minorities to succeed and fulfill their true potential, and in leveling the playing field so that everyone gets an equal shot in life. That is why I entered politics: to facilitate and open opportunities. That is why challenging stereotypes and career preconceptions is so important.

Did you know, Sir David, that only 5.4% of women are engaged in entrepreneurial activities, compared with double that for men? Yet if women were to set up businesses at the same rate as men, there would be 150,000 more start-ups a year. The lower figure is not due to a lack of talent or to physical barriers; it is mainly because of stereotypes, preconceptions and a lack of encouragement. I do not buy the argument that men are risk takers and women are not, or that men see possibilities and women see obstacles, but constantly asserting that makes it a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Women are capable of anything, so once the financial, legislative and logistical obstacles are removed, what remains are the social barriers that we place in front of women. It is these that we must tear down. We tore down the glass ceiling with equalities legislation, but some have stuck up an umbrella in its place, with negative talk and stereotyped roles. We have been tackling the remaining obstacles with the introduction of 30-hour free childcare and other policies. I want us to continue to do that, but also to foster more of a “can do, will do” attitude among everyone.

That is particularly important in tackling the severe shortage of women in STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—which fuels our skills shortage, which is something I talk about regularly in relation to my own constituency. In fact, in 2016, women accounted for just 7% of engineering apprenticeships, and only 20% of A-level physics students were female. If women in the UK had got into engineering at the same rate as men, the engineering skills gap would have been met in 2017. That is being cried out for in Wiltshire, which is a hub of engineering design and technology. Each year, I

As a former employment lawyer, I am far too familiar with the kind of discrimination that women face in the workplace. When I was discussing with them how they wanted to proceed, there was real anxiety, because whatever has gone on and whatever laws are in place to prevent victimisation, people know that once they raise an allegation of discrimination, regardless of what ultimately happens with that allegation, all too often the employment relationship is never the same again, if it survives at all. That would not usually manifest itself in anything blatant that could give rise to a further complaint, but many women feel that once they raise their concerns, their card is marked and their career at that particular employer is over. That is really about the culture that is created—the feeling that they do not want to make waves; the feeling that next time there is a promotion, they will not stand much of a chance; the feeling that their work colleagues are all talking about them behind their backs, and the risk, which we see in this place, that they could bump into the person they have complained about at any time.

Given that, is it any wonder that people see what happens when they raise their head above the parapet and do not feel empowered to speak out? Is it any wonder that I talk feel inhibited about raising concerns when, until recently, if they wanted to take a complaint any further, they would have to go into a tribunal system that the Supreme Court has declared discriminatory? We know about the huge drop in the tribunal claims once fees were introduced, and the number of sexual discrimination cases brought dropped even further, with an 87% drop, as well as a 70% drop in equal pay claims. I do not think that anybody has ever seriously considered that employers have suddenly been 87% less discriminatory. We know what that was: a barrier to justice, and a discriminatory one at that.

I want to say a few words about the success rate of discrimination claims for those who actually take their claims to the tribunal. There can be a considerable tangible impact on a woman’s work prospects, which is no doubt a deterrent for many. The success rate for sex discrimination claims has been around 20% for many years, and many women will look at those odds and think that it is not worth it. The fact is that women are more than twice as likely to succeed in a claim for unfair dismissal as they are in a claim for sex discrimination. There could be any number of reasons for that, not least the complexity of bringing a discrimination claim.

The failure of women to assert their rights is a big problem. Research by the Equality and Human Rights Commission suggests that up to 54,000 women a year could be forced out of their jobs due to pregnancy discrimination. That is 11% of all pregnant women in the workplace who lose their job as a result of pregnancy discrimination. That is not a scandal? Of the 54,000 potential claims a year relating to pregnancy discrimination, only 790 were lodged in 2015—less than 1.5% of all potential discriminatory acts resulted in a claim being lodged.
[Justin Madders]

What are the Government doing to tackle this rampant discrimination in the workplace and the inability of our system to protect women and assert their rights? It is evident that many women simply do not feel confident in asserting their right not to be discriminated against at work. Is there not a risk that this perpetuates the cycle of discrimination? Perhaps some employers do not know that what they are doing is wrong. Perhaps some will feel that they do not have to change their ways until they are forced to. Either way, the women lose out, and the employer loses out too, by demotivating and hindering people whose talents would make a significant contribution to the business if they were allowed to.

There should be no glass ceilings; everyone should have just as much chance of realising their potential. Childbirth should not be a barrier to success, and women should have the security of knowing that if things go wrong, they have a realistic avenue to seek redress and that there will be no adverse consequences for them if they challenge what they consider to be discriminatory acts.

We have a system in place that already puts security near the bottom of the pile in terms of priorities. Security should be the cornerstone of any settlement on how the workplace operates. Kosovo, Estonia, and Mexico are all rated by the OECD as having greater individual employment protection than this country. I would like to think that we could set our sights a little higher than that. Women’s rights are not just about individual dignity and respect in the workplace; they bring important social and economic benefits to this country. They help to encourage a committed and engaged workforce and the retention of skilled workers. They allow people to plan their lives and to plan for a future, knowing that if they do a good job and if their employer runs its business well, they will be rewarded.

We have a responsibility to challenge discrimination wherever it appears. The evidence tells us beyond a scintilla of doubt that discrimination in the workplace is out of control. To stamp it out, we need to fundamentally question whether the current system is doing the job that we want it to.

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): I asked Members to keep their speeches to five minutes, but everyone has exceeded that a bit. That means that someone may not get the chance to speak, so please keep your contributions to below five minutes.

3.6 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): Thank you, Sir David, for the opportunity to speak. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on this debate. This is an important subject that we need to continue to talk about.

Historically, women have been under-represented across many employment sectors. My experience throughout my 30-year corporate business career affirms that, as more often than not I was the only woman in the room in every business meeting, in every country I worked in—and that was a lot of meetings. I am happy to say that the tide is turning. In 2010, the 30% Club, founded by Helena Morrissey, who is Chichester born and bred, launched a campaign to get a minimum of 30% women on FTSE 100 boards. Today, that goal is close to being achieved, as women make up 28% of all directors of FTSE 100 companies. That progress is something to celebrate; however, there is still a lot more to be done to support women in the world of work.

Women commonly juggle multiple commitments and disproportionately take on family obligations, whether that is raising children or caring for elderly relatives. Part of the issue is the long-standing social constructs that we as a society have put in place. It is just as important to look at the roles of men at home and as it is to look at their role in the workplace. When the women and work all-party parliamentary group looked at this, the expert panel felt that improving the affordability of shared parental leave would help to create a cultural shift, by encouraging more men to share caring roles. One proposal was for shared parental leave to be paid at a greater rate than statutory maternity leave, to ensure shared parental leave is truly affordable.

In many countries, extended paternity leave schemes are already in place and are deemed to be a success. For example, in Iceland, both parents are entitled to three months of statutory leave and a further three months that can be shared between them. Consequently, women there enjoy a very high employment rate, at just under 83%. Sweden leads in the EU, with more than 75% of women in employment. Fathers receive 90 days of paid leave, which is a lot in comparison with the UK, where men receive one to two weeks. Those modern systems support women, enable them to return to the workplace and help to achieve a better gender balance in business. They will have a business case.

Last year, the employment rate for women over 16 in the UK reached a record high of 70.8%. However, these positive figures do not tell the full story: 42% of those women work part time. The effects of working part time can often mean that opportunities for promotion are limited, which has an impact on the gender pay gap. It does not have to be that way. The all-party group on women and work heard examples of good practice at the University of Sussex, which promoted Alison Phipps to a professorship, despite her being a part-time worker after having two children. I personally witnessed an excellent example of good practice when my fellow classmate at the London Business School was promoted to partner level at PricewaterhouseCoopers while she was on maternity leave.

Another factor to consider in the 21st-century workplace is self-employment. There are 1.6 million self-employed women, which accounts for the majority of the newly self-employed as well, probably because of the flexibility that comes with that option. At present, self-employed women may be eligible for maternity allowance of £140.98 a week, but not statutory maternity pay, meaning that they will receive a lot less than an employee. Similarly, casual workers or zero-hours workers do not have the right to paid leave or perhaps even to attend antenatal appointments with a healthcare professional. Such barriers negatively impact on women, and more needs to be done to address those issues.

Leo Docherty: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done, both before coming to the House and while here, to encourage women to engage in politics. It is the duty of all parliamentarians to encourage that. It is a matter of regret to me that we have only ever had male MPs for Aldershot. That is not something I want
to change too soon, but I am pleased to have some female constituents here today whom I would encourage to maintain an interest in politics.

How important does my hon. Friend think it is to encourage young women to get involved in business careers, given her experience of being an apprentice? Does she think that we are doing all that we can to encourage awareness among young women of school age of the opportunities for work and apprenticeships at that critical stage in their school career when they consider what career to go into?

**Gillian Keegan:** I think that for both men and women the availability of high-quality apprenticeships needs to be better understood by all children and parents, and from a young age. I did an apprenticeship at 16 and I was the only woman. There were four guys, so I was the token 20%, which is a figure we often find. It is a great way into the workplace, particularly degree-level apprenticeships, which means that people do not have to choose between education and work experience, and certainly it propelled my career.

I have mentioned self-employed women, zero-hours contracts and the barriers that women face. Millions of women have taken time out of work to raise a family, and others take time out to care for loved ones. For them it is often difficult to get back on the career ladder. Of the people who are out of paid work to care for family, 90% are women. That is a huge loss, not only to those individuals, but to our economy and businesses all over the country. I welcomed the announcement by the Minister for Women and Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), that £1.5 million is being made available to support people, particularly women, to get back into work after time out.

The fund will offer grants to help people return to work in the private sector by updating their skills and supporting businesses with guidance and a toolkit to increase employment opportunities. That is just part of the £5 million commitment made by the Prime Minister last year to help people back into employment after a career break. Similar returner schemes are already up and running in the public sector, in the health professions, social work, and the civil service. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is using the cyber-security skills impact fund to help women who have been out of the labour market to get jobs in cyber-security.

It is crucial that women have the opportunity to reach their potential and that our industries do not lose out on their valuable skills and experience. The Government have championed the rights of women in the workplace with gender pay being just one area widely commented on. We are moving in the right direction, and I am pleased that we are having debates such as this one to address the barriers that are still present for women in work.

3.13 pm

**Laura Pidcock** (North West Durham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) for securing this extremely important debate. I am sure it will not be a surprise that some of the interpretations that I have of the world of work are somewhat different from what has been expressed. For many of the women in my constituency, work is not a choice or a health benefit, but an absolute necessity for survival.

Last Thursday we marked International Women’s Day: a day when we celebrate the victories that women have achieved so far on the path to liberation, and a day when we remember how far we have to go. That one day in the calendar is when we focus on women’s issues and they are thrust into the limelight. It serves as an opportunity to briefly scrutinise our collective experience. The Labour party used the day to announce that we would fine employers who not only fail to audit their gender pay gap, but fail to take decisive action against it.

In the narrative around women at work, the focus is not always on workplace issues that affect women the most. In recent years we have seen the agenda—it is as though I knew what the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) was going to say in her speech—that applies only to women at the top. Women in this Chamber will be aware of campaigns such as the 30% Club, which aims to get at least 30% of women on the board of large public companies, and similar campaigns. I do not wish to discredit such campaigns, but I do not think it is unfair for me to say that they are irrelevant to the majority of working women in this country.

Pictures of gender-balanced boards or of women chief executive officers might be glitzy, but they are a distraction from the material reality of working-class women in this country.

**Gillian Keegan:** I simply want to say that I am a working-class woman who left school at 16 but still aspired to be on a board, so I would say they are relevant. They are just one part of the picture.

**Laura Pidcock:** Those campaigns do not focus on the reality of most working-class women in work at this point in time in our nation. As with most things, success at the top does not trickle down. [Interruption.] I will not take any more interventions, because of time constraints.

What good is it if a woman becomes a CEO, only to rely on an army of women on precarious contracts and on poverty pay to make her sandwiches, look after her children and clean her offices? The success of elite women does not facilitate the emancipation of lower-paid sisters in the economy. In fact, some would argue it prevents it. The experience of most women, after all, is that of a worker, not of a boss. Our obsession with boardrooms has not only failed to close the pay gap for working-class women, but produced another kind of pay gap—the gap between women at the bottom and women at the top. Professional women earn on average 80% more than unskilled women, while the difference between professional and unskilled men is still huge, at 60%.

Although a few elite women succeed, the experience for most working-class women is of a system that is completely rigged against them. It is a system in which women are on zero-hours contracts and are scared that they will not get adequate maternity pay if they want to start a family. As a proud pregnant working woman, I know that my position protects me from many of the forms of discrimination that pregnant women face in the workplace. It is a system in which women are still the main childcare providers. They represent 90% of lone parents and are terrified that they will not get enough hours to provide for their children.

It is a system in which 230,000 jobs held by women pay less than the minimum wage. The Government—let us be honest—do not even give adequate notice to
women about changes to their pensions, leaving them in fear of their retirement, and then think it appropriate to suggest that those women expecting to reach retirement take an apprenticeship. It is a system in which women in low pay and poverty reduce their meal portions to allow their children to eat in the school holidays. It is a system in which unaffordable and inaccessible childcare forces women to work fewer hours or accept poorly paid, poor quality part-time positions—and, of course, as has been mentioned, they are at risk of dismissal while on maternity leave.

It has been mentioned many times in the Chamber that the fact that we have had two female Prime Ministers satisfactorily explains that the Conservatives are the party of gender equality. That is an affront to the women in my constituency and across the UK who experience much inequality. It is important that there are women in the highest positions, of course, but it is never enough to just stop there. There have always been women who have succeeded in the face of structural sexism and women who buck the trend, but we cannot and must not be satisfied with the achievements of a minority of women while most women bear the brunt of poverty and austerity.

Some Members might not know that International Women’s Day started as a campaign for the rights of women garment workers in New York. Women’s issues have always been inextricably linked with class issues. Only by punishing the bosses who exploit women and only by creating a social security system that recognises the inequality faced by women, will we have any hope of genuine equality at work. Fundamentally, we must give all workers the ability to collectively bargain for their own pay and terms and conditions. We need a system that challenges the gender-segregated nature of employment.

I am glad that the hon. Member for Redditch secured the debate, but I can tell the House that women in my constituency will not be grateful for the way the Conservatives have treated them.

3.19 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) for bringing this important matter to the House, particularly in view of the journey that she went on in her working life. It was good to hear about the positive changes she experienced.

The influx of women into the workplace is one of the greatest social revolutions of recent decades. As my hon. Friend mentioned, in 1951 only one third of women were economically active—employed or unemployed. Today the proportion is about three quarters of women. Thanks to that remarkable change in society, workplaces across the country have benefited from the talents and contributions of women who just decades ago would not have entered those workplaces. Today women are free, and the country as a whole is more prosperous. However, there is still more to do to create equal opportunity between men and women, both in the world of work and across society.

We must make sure that no industry is closed to women because of sexist prejudice, and that no woman is paid less than a man for equal work. I was delighted to visit my local primary school, Whitehills, in Forfar, on Monday morning to discuss the correlation between science, technology, engineering and maths and career opportunities. When I asked the 400 pupils about their career goals, it was heartening that there was no evidence of gender-specific jobs. There were would-be scientists, engineers and architects aplenty. Those young people had their minds wide open and we need to ensure that as they grow up and develop we do not narrow them in any way. All jobs are open to both genders. That is why I am proud to support the UK Government, who have required companies with more than 250 employees to publish data on their gender pay gap. It is important that we get to the root causes of the overall gender pay gap and introduce the appropriate measures to deal with them, so that the young girls I met on Monday will enter a workplace where gender discrimination is a thing of the past.

Childcare is a massive financial burden on any working family. It is no coincidence that the gender pay gap widens considerably after age 30, or that relatively few women have broken into high-ranking positions that require considerable experience. Indeed, when I decided to stand for Parliament, the question of how I would be able to have a family in years to come was raised. However, no job in this country should force any female to make a choice between career and family. Of course, individual families know best how to organise themselves and balance childcare with work commitments. However, it is crucial that the Government should offer parents the childcare support that makes achieving that balance easier and allows them to do so without being pressured by antiquated societal assumptions.

I therefore commend the Government on doubling the amount of free childcare available to parents of three and four-year-olds in England and Wales, introducing shared parental leave and pay, and encouraging more flexible working, including in the armed forces. I also support the increase in childcare hours brought in by the Scottish Government, although I believe that the roll-out was slightly ill-thought-out, and that further flexibility is required to increase parents’ ability to take up the provision.

All the measures I have mentioned will help more mothers to remain in work. That will help more women to rise to the top of their field, which will help to reduce the gender pay gap. While there is certainly more to do to encourage a culture of more flexible working and of mothers and fathers sharing responsibility for childcare more equally, the measures in question are a strong start.

Women must also have an equal opportunity to use their expertise through enterprise. As has been mentioned, only 5.7% of women were involved in starting or running a new business last year. That is half the rate for men. For that reason I recently joined the Telegraph campaign for the Government to boost female entrepreneurship in Britain. There is a need for easier access to capital, higher levels of funding, and support from experienced mentors to guide people through that life-changing process. Astonishingly, the Federation of Small Businesses has suggested that Britain is missing up to 1.2 million new enterprises because the business potential of women remains untapped in the sector. Another poll demonstrated that two thirds of female business owners were not taken seriously when trying to secure funding for start-ups. That leaves them two options—to self-fund or to walk away. That is simply unacceptable.
I say those things with optimism about the future. Let us consider the progress that we have already made, which our great-grandmothers would not have thought remotely possible. I wholeheartedly believe that the progress we want can be made quickly. It will take action in this House and in wider society, but we should go forward with confidence that it can be done. A post-Brexit Britain has to back British businesses and I look forward to continued progress in that area.

3.25 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing it, and agreed with much of what she said, although however much progress has been made, there is still a huge amount to do.

I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group on women and work, which the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) co-chairs. Ironically, I am the secretary of the group. It is one of the most informative and best organised that I have been a member of in my past three years in Parliament. Sadly, I have not been able to attend as frequently as I did at the outset. It has done a fantastic job, complementing the work of the Women and Equalities Committee, illuminating workplace issues that affect women and bringing cross-party consensus to the search for ideas and solutions.

Through my membership of the all-party group I have learned about excellent programmes such as those at Centrica, which has a fantastic female engineering apprenticeship programme, and Royal Bank of Scotland, which does brilliant work on mentoring and female returns. To my mind, too much intervention of that type happens in isolation. Encouraging as it is, we need more structural intervention to help to address the gender pay gap—and the gender employment gap: women still struggle to get on in traditionally male-dominated sectors. That is why I want more ambitious Government intervention on easily accessible and affordable childcare.

I take the point that has been made about the expansion of childcare support package in these isles, and that is to be welcomed.

I also want the UK Government to go further to provide greater encouragement and incentive for the take-up of shared parental leave. It was a worthy but, I believe, unfinished policy success of the coalition Government’s time in office. I want more men to be confident about requesting—and to be encouraged to request—shared parental leave. However, that will happen only when there is intervention to that effect, as the hon. Member for Chichester mentioned. The change would help women in competing with men for jobs. Right now, if a man and a woman in their mid-twenties with similar credentials are job candidates and go to an interview panel, there will, sadly, although it will not necessarily be publicly articulated, be an unconscious bias away from the woman, in case she needs maternity leave. If fathers were to take on more responsibility in that area, it would clearly rebalance and equalise the opportunities for women to get on—and help them to be better fathers.

As someone who is proud to “talk flexible working” with my staff, I want more action from the Government to define what flexible working means. All employees currently have a right to request flexible work, but there is no definition of it. Sometimes that leaves both employer and employee in a difficult position in discussions. Guidelines would help both of them to know where they stand. They would strengthen the position of women and men in securing flexible work, and employers in retaining staff and increasing productivity and morale. We are doing what we can in Scotland to make things more progressive, although we cannot act on all the areas where I would want us to.

I understand the points made by the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock). However, we have lowered the reporting threshold in the requirement on companies to publish their gender pay gap, so it now applies to those with more than 20 employees, rather than 250. We currently have the lowest gap in the UK, at 6.6% compared with 9.1% overall. We want more progress, clearly. I understand the concerns of the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), but we have led by example in matters of gender balance. We have the first female First Minister in Scotland, who chairs a gender-balanced Cabinet. We are also committed to legislating to ensure gender balance in public sector boardrooms by 2020, and to campaigning for gender balance in the boardrooms of private-sector organisations that have signed our business pledge.

We welcome the debate, and understand the positivity of the hon. Member for Redditch, but there is much more that we could and should do to make sure that all of society and the whole economy can benefit from the closing of the gender pay and employment gaps.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): I will now call the last Back-Bench speaker but I expect a tiny speech—no more than two minutes.

3.29 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I will do my best, Sir David. I thank you for calling me, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing this debate. It is a particular honour to speak on this important subject in the year of the 100th anniversary of women gaining the right to vote. While we celebrate the advancement of women in society, politics, and the workplace, we must also reflect on progress that still needs to be made, because especially in the workplace, women do not have parity with their male counterparts. There are many reasons why women have not secured the great progress that we deserve in recent years. I will try to address as many of those reasons as possible, and set out why I believe the Government have a duty to take action.

The first and most obvious disparity is pay. The Office for National Statistics found that men earn, on average, nearly 20% more than women, and 48 years after Labour passed the Equal Pay Act 1970, men are still paid substantially more than their female counterparts. Those figures are simply unacceptable. The gender pay gap exposes the multitude of barriers and other daily challenges that women face in the workplace. Women are unlikely to progress up the career ladder at the same speed as men. Employers may discriminate against women when recruiting due to the maternity leave they may take in future, and research published today by the
Equality and Human Rights Commission states that six in 10 employers—59%—agree that a woman should disclose whether she is pregnant during the recruitment process. That is unacceptable; that is not what we are fighting for.

As a single mother I have experienced at first hand the enormous challenge of juggling parenthood with a sustainable career. With two young children at primary school, the only work available to me was in retail, and I met many single mothers in that position who were struggling on low pay. Many also had poor working conditions, which is something we need to combat, especially for single women. I am pleased that an all-party group for single or lone parents will soon be launched.

We cannot begin to achieve gender equality or improve social mobility across society when half the population face a different set of social rules from the other half. We have a duty as parliamentarians to do all we can to level the playing field and support women in the workplace, and we know that Government intervention in that area works. I therefore hope that when responding to the debate, the Minister will set out in detailed terms the measures to be taken to address the inequalities that women face in the workplace. We cannot strive to move forward as a country when half of employees are held back. Time is up on unequal conditions and treatment; we need action now for a fair workplace.

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Everybody pins a minute. I will now call the Opposition Front-Bench speakers, but I ask them to limit their speeches to under nine minutes to allow the Minister an opportunity to respond.

3.33 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir David. It is also a pleasure, as a woman with all the privileges of an MP, to get up on my pins in this place and talk about issues that affect women all around us. We have a moral obligation to speak for women who do not have the same opportunities to speak out, and that includes many women who work here but are not Members. Dignity at work for women everywhere should be one of our core demands in politics. This is not about women getting a special deal; it is about dignity and respect.

I commend the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) for securing this debate. She made the important point that the key to female empowerment is economic independence. She shared some of her own experiences, and said that fairer treatment for women is good for the culture of any business as a whole. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) shared the experiences of some of his colleagues and family members and—as often happens in this place—such examples can illustrate political points better than any number of statistics from the Library. The hon. Members for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) and for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) spoke about looking elsewhere in the world for inspiration to tackle the UK’s problems in this area, and I hope to provide some ideas from Scotland that the Minister may wish to contemplate. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) gave us the benefit of his legal background and experience and called for greater employment protections for women against discrimination. The hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) spoke with characteristic passion about the pay gap between those at the bottom of the pay scale and those at the top, and of structural sexism—very important points.

I am particularly pleased to speak in a debate secured by the hon. Member for Redditch because I remember her in November last year advising 65-year-old women to get an apprenticeship—that was also mentioned by the hon. Member for North West Durham. I am not sure why those women would want to undertake an apprenticeship if not to begin a career that would last a few decades, but perhaps things are a little different down Redditch way. The speech by the hon. Member for Redditch was very complimentary about the UK Government’s track record in this area, but sadly I would argue that the Government she supports are very bad at supporting women in work. I could run through the entire gamut of failures, but I will settle for just a few.

First, the two-child cap for child tax credits. Whoever thought that that was a good idea? Who sat down one day and thought that the third child costs nothing to bring up? Who thought that the best way to help parents survive in a challenging job market is to cut the amount of money they have to live on? How does that help children to grow up strong enough to be productive members of society and contribute to the economy? Women’s Aid calculated that that move alone put 200,000 children below the poverty line—that is 200,000 children going hungry because this Government lack simple human decency.

Library research from last year showed that 86% of the impact of austerity cuts lands on women and will continue to do so in future. WASPI women who are not too busy doing an apprenticeship will tell you just how unfair the sudden hikes in retirement age are. Indeed, the costs to individuals associated with the gender pay gap continue into retirement because female retirees end up with smaller pensions than their male counterparts, but still there is no action to address that.

Law firm Travers Smith reported yesterday that the pay gap between its employees was 14.7%—women are paid only six sevenths of what men are paid in the same firm. For bonus pay, women are paid 37.8% less. Those figures are not because women do different jobs. Female associates are paid less than male associates, and female senior associates are paid less than male senior associates. It is the same in other big law firms. Women are the poorer sisters again and again and again.

The gender pay gap is not the only problem. The Government had to be dragged through the courts in order to scrap employment tribunal charges that prevented access to justice for lower-paid workers—a policy that adversely affected far more women than men. Losing the employment protections afforded by the threat of effective enforcement would have been one more poke in the eye for female workers. Discrimination against working women is rife. As the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston said, the report by the Equality and Human Rights Commission stated that 11% of mothers reported that they were either dismissed or made compulsorily redundant when others in their workplace were not, or treated so poorly that they felt they had to leave their job. That could mean as many as 54,000 mothers a
year facing pregnancy discrimination. About twice as many mothers—one in five—said that they experienced harassment or negative comments related to pregnancy or flexible working from their employer and/or colleagues. That could affect as many as 100,000 mothers a year.

As for the thought that some gender balance might start to creep into the boards of top companies, or indeed the civil service—dream on. The European Institute for Gender Equality released an update to the gender equality index which for the UK showed no progress in many areas over the past 10 years, including for decision-making powers in the business sector. Of 18 permanent secretaries in the UK civil service, only five are women.

The UK Government seem to be doing little to help to rebalance gender opportunities. By contrast—this was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray)—the gender-balanced Cabinet in the Scottish Government is leading the way. It has established a fair work convention aimed at developing a fair employment and workplace framework for women. It has committed to achieving gender balance on private, public, and third sector boards by 2020, and it has established a strategic group on women and work to tackle the barriers faced by women in the labour market.

Let me offer another example to show that things do not have to be this way. Microbusinesses offer real opportunities and could have a significant economic impact on women. One example of good practice is the Etsy platform for the creative industries, which gives people with internet access and a good idea the opportunity to trade globally. Its flexibility and ease of access has brought forward a whole range of artistic women entrepreneurs. A whopping 86% of Etsy sellers are women, in stark contrast to just 20% of small and medium-sized business owners generally. A large chunk—32%—are from rural communities, and they are younger: the median age of the workforce is 38, with 67% under 45. Most microbusinesses are outside traditional full-time employment models: 62% of their owners are part of the independent workforce, and only 21% have full-time jobs elsewhere.

That shows that providing small-scale opportunities for flexible working is massively beneficial for women entrepreneurs and the economy, and leads to a good geographical spread of income. It also suggests that employers are missing out on the huge productivity that they would get from their female employees if only they embraced more flexible working. When barriers are reduced, traditional stereotypes and gender imbalances in the workforce disappear and women are shown to be just as productive as men. The Government should work to remove those barriers and enable women into work, not just in microbusinesses but across all sectors.

Let me make a very important final point. Women have to be able to work with dignity. That means that they have to be able to work free of harassment, abuse, sexism and misogyny. We know that a lot of work needs to be done to make that a reality. The Scottish National party is not immune to that, as the recent case of Mark McDonald demonstrates, and nor is any other party in this place. I am glad that my party took action when that issue was brought up, but none of us has a halo. We may need more than encouragement and good intentions. We may very well need new legislation. Perhaps the Minister will indicate whether the Government are open to that.

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing this really important debate and on her wide-ranging speech. It is clear from the contributions we have heard that we are all aware of the importance of equality, to put it in a nutshell, and I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) in particular for giving such a thorough account of all those contributions.

It is hard to believe that until 1946 a marriage bar prevented married women from joining the civil service, and women civil servants had to resign on marrying unless they were given an exemption. It is even harder to believe that the Foreign Office did not remove that bar until 1973. Although we have come a long way in some respects, the continuing gender pay gap, the greater prevalence of zero-hours contracts among women, and the Weinstein scandal remind us how limited progress has been in others.

Women born in the 1950s have lived through major changes in the workplace. They should have the right to a decent pension, but instead their state pension age was changed without sufficient notice for them to prepare properly. Labour would extend pension credit to the women affected and allow them to retire at 64 on a reduced state pension, rather than wait until 66, if they chose to do so. Will the Government act, even at this late stage, to give women born in the 1950s justice?

Many Members mentioned the gender pay gap. It was of course a Labour Government who passed the Equal Pay Act 1970, following the brave fight for justice by Dagenham women who were employed sewing car seat covers. It is less well known that a factor behind the introduction of that Act was the expectation that the UK would soon accede to the European Economic Community, so UK legislation needed to be in line with the treaty of Rome, which requires that men and women receive equal pay for equal work. That helps to illustrate why the Opposition have fought so hard to amend clause 7 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which was designed to give the Government the power to amend by statutory instrument, primary legislation such as the Equal Pay Act.

The gender pay gap has narrowed over time, but it remains more than 9% for full-time employees and more than double that—18.4%—for employees overall. Men are more heavily represented in highly paid occupations: 72% of chief executives, 70% of managers and directors, and 92% of people in skilled trades are men. For example, easyJet reported a gender pay gap of just under 52%. The main reason for that is that most of the airline’s pilots are male and the average salary for a pilot is £92,000 a year, but more than two-thirds of easyJet cabin crew are women and the average salary for that job is £25,500. Women far outnumber men among health and social work professionals, yet the gender pay gap in that sector is nearly 19%. Some 58% of students accepted on to medicine and dentistry courses in 2016 were women, but only around 16% of consultant surgeons were. Paediatrics was the only specialty where more than a quarter of consultants were women. In contrast, in 2016 only around 11% of registered UK nurses were male.
Companies with more than 250 employees are required to complete a gender audit of pay by April 2018, but the legislation has no teeth. They are not required to do anything about their gender pay gap: the only sanction they will suffer is reputational damage, significant though that may be. Will the Government introduce tough new rules, as Labour would, to fine companies with large gender pay gaps that do not take action to close them?

Another part of the explanation for the overall gender pay gap is that, in general, a far higher percentage of women than men are in part-time employment. Part-time work tends to be paid less well than full-time work, and it offers fewer opportunities for progression. At the last count, 42% of women in employment were working part time, compared with 13% of men—more than 6 million women, compared with 2.25 million men. That difference is especially marked from the age of 30 onwards. That no doubt reflects the fact that women still overwhelmingly play a greater role in bringing up children, caring for other family members and doing household work. Among people over 30, the percentage of men who work full time is around a third higher than the percentage of women. The gender pay gap also rises among older age groups: it is around 2% for full-time workers in their 20s and 30s, but increases to nearly 14% for full-time workers aged 40 to 49.

Those figures should not be allowed to disguise the reality that part-time and flexible work can still be difficult to find. Since last April, mothers whose youngest child is aged three, rather than five as previously, have been required to look for work if they are claiming social security. Many mothers with very young children want to work, but affordable childcare that fits around work is extremely difficult to find in a lot of places, as is work that fits with childcare. Under universal credit, childcare costs have to be paid up front and then claimed, which is not the case with tax credits. That is a major outlay for parents, who would not be claiming universal credit unless they were on a low income in the first place. Citizens Advice has also highlighted problems with the online system for universal credit, which does not accept receipts for childcare unless they are in a specific form. Can the Minister assure us that those problems have been resolved?

A study by Gingerbread of employment opportunities for single mothers found that very few part-time jobs were advertised on the Government’s own job search portal, which all jobseekers are required to register with. Will the Government ensure that the claimant commitments of parents of very young children—in particular single parents—reflect the availability of childcare and part-time work?

Women are more likely than men to be on a zero-hours contract: 3% of women in work are on one, compared with 2% of men. They are also more likely to be in temporary work: 5% of women are, as opposed to 4% of men. Insecure work can have different implications for women. Caring responsibilities are difficult to fit in with insecure work, because a parent or carer may not be able to drop everything at short notice for a shift. Will the Government take action to ban exploitative zero-hours contracts, as Labour would?

In her Mansion House speech on 2 March, the Prime Minister said that the UK would “not engage in a race to the bottom in the standards and protections” of workers’ rights. We should be far more ambitious than that. The EU is looking to extend those rights by, for example, requiring employers to give workers on zero-hours contracts a written statement of their pay rates and expected hours of work. Will the Government ensure that they match such advances in employment rights, so that UK workers do not have less protection than workers in other parts of Europe after we leave the EU?

The Government estimate that universal credit will bring as many as 1 million people under in-work conditionality by the time it is fully rolled out, which means that people who are in work but on a low income will be asked to increase their hours. However, some sectors, such as retail, where women workers are heavily represented, tend to offer extra hours at weekends or evenings, which are much more difficult to fit around caring responsibilities than daytime hours during the week. What assessment have the Government made of the impact of in-work conditionality on the number of women at risk of being sanctioned?

There is also evidence that women on zero-hours contracts or in temporary work may be at a higher risk of sexual harassment at work, because there is a greater power imbalance between an employer and someone who does not have a permanent contract. Women in that situation may be more reluctant to report harassment, for fear of losing out in future on work that they desperately need, and there may not be a proper HR structure for people to report abuse. In 2014, an employment tribunal imposed £19,500 damages on an employer in a case of that kind. The level of those damages in part reflected the employer’s failure to follow up the complaint, but the tribunal also gave weight to the fact that the employee was on a zero-hours contract and so could be said to be more vulnerable.

It is illegal to treat women less favourably at work as a result of pregnancy or maternity leave. Statutory rights to maternity leave and maternity pay were first introduced in 1975 under a Labour Government. While it is true that domestic legislation predated European directives in this area, European legislation has also led to the extension of rights, such as improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers, and workers who are new mothers. Here again, will the Government ensure that workers in the UK do not come to have lesser rights than their European counterparts as European legislation develops in the area of parental leave?

Rights are one thing; the exercise of those rights and enforcement is just as important. A survey for the TUC shows that one in 10 women found that when they returned to work, they were given a more junior position. In the five years from 2008 to 2013, more than 9,000 women brought tribunal claims on the grounds of unfair dismissal or unfair treatment as a result of pregnancy. It may be even more common than those figures suggest, as many women may not be aware of their rights or simply decide it is too much trouble to fight against discrimination.

Pregnancy and maternity claims fell by one quarter following the introduction of fees, which highlights how important a factor fees were in dissuading people to fight for their rights. Labour pledged to abolish tribunal fees at the last election, and thankfully the Supreme Court ruled in July 2017 that fees were illegal. Statistics published a few days ago show that in the six months after that judgment, the number of employment cases overall taken to a tribunal rose by 100%—although that
increase is on a number reduced as a result of fees. Even so, a senior employment lawyer at the solicitors Kingsley Napley recently highlighted that the system is struggling to cope with the increase, as funding for tribunals was cut in the wake of the introduction of fees. At London South tribunal, for example, current estimates are that the parties in a discrimination case that may last two or three days will have to wait until late this year or early next year for it to be heard. The basis of the Supreme Court judgment was that fees impeded access to justice, but so does excessive delay. Will the Government ensure that the tribunal system is properly resourced?

What of the future? As has been said, since 2010 more women than men have started apprenticeships, which is a sign of positive change. A major factor in that was the announcement in 2009 by the last Labour Government of 50,000 new social care apprenticeships and more. The first of these was piloted in 2010 and an impact assessment in 2012 found that it helped reduce the risk of further care needs and reduced the likelihood of requiring home care. Ultimately, it is for individuals to decide how many hours to work. But we know that women are more likely to be in part-time work. For them, it is crucial that the workplace is more flexible and accommodating. An extra 1.1 million people of BAME backgrounds is at its highest rate since records began, at 64.8%. An extra 1.1 million people of BAME backgrounds have got into work since 2010, and almost exactly half of that increase is women. However, there is much more to do. Women from some BAME backgrounds have an employment rate of only 51.6%, and as part of the Government’s race disparity audit follow-up we are working on pilots to see how to address that issue in the workplace.

Alok Sharma: Unfortunately we do not have time for a long debate on this, but as I have said previously in the House, the welfare changes we have brought forward actually ensure that work pays. The hon. Lady will disagree, but I am sure that she will welcome the money made available in terms of childcare costs, as the hon. Members for Burnley (Julie Cooper) and for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) and my hon. Friends the Members for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) and for Angus did. When I was first elected in 2010 and talking in my constituency to many parents—especially mums—of young children, the cost of childcare was a key barrier to returning to work and increasing their hours. We have acted by introducing 30 hours’ free childcare for working parents of three and four-year-olds and tax-free childcare, and under universal credit the Government will cover up to 85% of childcare costs for eligible claimants. It is worth noting that an independent evaluation of the early roll-out of the childcare offer shows that parents are working much more flexibly and about 23% of mothers have been able to increase their hours as a result of that support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch and others referred to returners. Of course, putting in £5 million to fund specially designed programmes to help returners to the workplace in both the public sector and the private sector is very important. We should encourage that.

Laura Pidcock: It is irrefutable that there are more people in employment, but does the Minister acknowledge that work is more precarious, and that people have to do two or three jobs?
[Alok Sharma]

I am fast running out of time, but we had a discussion about the Taylor review and flexible working. One of the review’s key outcomes is a recommendation for employers to offer more flexible working.

A number of points were raised on shared parental leave by my hon. Friends the Members for Chippenham and for Redditch. I confirm that the Government Equalities Office and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy have launched a £1.5 million campaign to promote shared parental leave. There was also a discussion on encouraging women into science, technology, engineering and maths jobs, and the Government are making more funding available for that.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) spoke about discrimination. He will be aware that maternity discrimination is against the law, and the Government are working with ACAS to update guidance. As I said, there was a discussion on the Taylor review, and the Government have launched a number of consultations, which will make a difference.

We are almost out of time, but we have had a really thoughtful and comprehensive debate. Hon. Members have highlighted the significant progress made since 2010, but we should be under no illusions: there is further to go, and it is absolutely imperative that all of us strain every sinew to ensure we have a workforce in Britain that reflects the modern, diverse country that we are.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered women and work.

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[Allergy Awareness in Schools]

4 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered allergy awareness in schools.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, as we discuss the issue of allergy awareness. It is a serious issue, and I look forward to discussing it and hearing from the Minister later on. I will talk about the serious and growing problem of allergies and the challenges faced by those who have them, the portrayal of allergies in the media and how that shapes our attitudes, the horrendous incidents of allergy bullying in schools and the potential for fatalities, and what we can do to raise awareness in schools and beyond.

First, I feel I should declare an interest; I had my first allergic reaction when I was four years old. I walked to the shop with my grandmother, where we bought a bar of chocolate—a Marathon, which shows my age—and by the time we had walked back up to the end of the street I had vomited up the Marathon. When I was a small child, happily, that was as far as the allergy went. It was not life-threatening; it was certainly an inconvenience and something to be avoided, but it was not as serious as it later became.

When I reached my teenage years, the reactions became more serious and began to include swelling in my mouth and throat. That was when I was prescribed an EpiPen injector, which I carry, regularly updated, in my handbag to this day and take with me wherever I go. That is an important thing for anyone who has been prescribed an adrenaline injector to do.

The experience of going through an anaphylactic reaction is terrifying. It involves a whole-body physiological reaction. I start to get a tingle in my mouth if I have eaten something that has nuts in it. I feel almost a rasping at the back of my throat. That, for me, is the tell-tale sign, at which point I try to take action. I sometimes try to make myself sick, to expel whatever it is I have eaten, although I know that can sometimes be problematic. I never really know how serious the reaction will be; sometimes it is mild and can be treated with antihistamine, and sometimes it develops into full-blown anaphylaxis. It is difficult for me as an individual to know which it will be.

When it does become anaphylaxis, that is when the heart starts beating. I find it is quite similar to having an asthma attack, where breathing becomes incredibly difficult. My face swells up and changes colour to become a sort of red-purple, I have palpitations, and it is not a pleasant sensation. Ultimately I need the adrenaline injector and treatment in hospital; I thank the NHS and indeed the health services in countries around the world where I have experienced this, as I literally owe my life to them.

I know what it is like to experience it as a sufferer myself, but I also want to describe how one mother talked about having her toddler try a walnut sauce for the first time. She said:

“His mouth started to bubble and mini-hives appeared. I could see the hives getting bigger and spreading all over his cheeks, his ears, up the back of his neck and starting to go down his chest.”
On the car on the way to hospital, he started to cough and vomit everywhere in the backseat. My greatest fear started to kick in when the choking, vomiting and crying turned to utter silence. He had gone limp. I was saying ‘C’mon buddy. Wake up’.”

She says: “This is it. I thought. ‘I’ve killed my boy.’”

That little boy received hospital treatment and lived. But I ask hon. Members to put themselves in that parent’s shoes—particularly for that first reaction, when they do not know what is happening, the anaphylaxis is so terrifying and the child is of an age where they cannot even tell them what their symptoms are and what they are experiencing.

At this point, I pay tribute to Nicky Forrest, a mum in my constituency who, in addition to all sorts of work on the parent council of a local school, runs a local support group for allergy sufferers and their parents so they can share their experiences, advise one another and campaign.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful case. Does she agree that schools need to educate children and parents further, so that children who have allergies can socialise like any other child?

Jo Swinson: Absolutely. As I can attest, having an allergy is a condition that can be managed and need not prevent someone from having a full life and taking part in school and all the educational opportunities, but that relies on a wider awareness of allergy. Indeed, living with allergy as an adult is the same.

That is why awareness and education are so important— even more so because the prevalence of allergies in our society is growing. It is now estimated that about 2% of children have a nut allergy; of course there are many other allergens as well, so if we include other foods the percentage is higher. Last year in England there were more than 1,900 food-related hospital admissions for anaphylaxis. The anaphylaxis hospital admission rate increased sevenfold between 1992 and 2012. The UK is not alone in that, as there are other countries where the prevalence of allergies is growing, but we need to recognise it as a serious health issue. Indeed, it can be fatal. Data over the same period from 1992 to 2012 showed 124 fatalities were likely to be due to food-based anaphylaxis, 48 of which were school-aged children. For one in six of those school-aged children who died, the reactions occurred in school or another educational environment. The role of schools in this is crucial.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. Since the Human Medicines (Amendment) Regulations 2017, adrenaline auto-injectors can be held by schools, but it is crucial that the education goes to teaching staff, who are reluctant to use them as well. Will she comment on that?

Jo Swinson: I certainly will. I praise the change to the regulations, which is a positive thing. It would be great if schools had some help with the cost of the injectors, because they go out of date; they typically last from a year to 18 months before they have to be replaced, and they can cost from £30 to £100 each, but the change is very helpful.

The hon. Lady is right about the training element. I was scared about using my own EpiPen. I carried it for years before I used it, and I used to go to hospital if something happened because I was petrified about what would happen if I used it. The first time I used it, I was on a parliamentary trip looking at human rights issues in Chechnya, and it was not safe to go to hospital because we had to go everywhere under armed guard. I was in a situation where I had to use the EpiPen, and I was really scared. Nicole, a wonderful woman from the human rights group who was with me, held my hand. We read the instructions and we did it together.

It started to work really quickly, and the relief and the experience of doing it have made me say to other people with EpiPens, “If you’re experiencing your reaction, use it. Then go to hospital, absolutely, but use that EpiPen, because it starts to work right away and delay can be fatal.” I know the experience I had is probably shared by others, but it is not the best medical advice. The more we can train and encourage people that it is a positive thing to do and will bring relief to someone who is having that kind of reaction is important.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Lady for introducing today’s debate. I too declare an interest, because my 15-year-old son has a severe peanut allergy. We have gone through life having to manage it since he was seven. I have only praise for my son’s primary school, which managed the medications and the out-of-date medications when the date was coming up. My worry and concern, not just for my son but for others in the same position, is secondary school, because things completely change. There are 1,000-plus pupils in the school, including teenagers who are difficult to manage and seem to think, “It’s okay, we can manage this.” My son’s reaction is so severe that if somebody else in the room has a bag of peanuts he reacts and needs his medication. I will get to the point: we need to inform other pupils and teachers of the seriousness of this.

Jo Swinson: I absolutely concur. That is why this wider awareness is important. Of course individuals need to have the information to manage their own condition, but particularly in those teenage years it can be more difficult for people. They feel a bit more awkward when they are eating out, because they might be perceived to be making a fuss. It is not making a fuss, but that is how it can feel in a group negotiating all sorts of adolescent relationships. For others to understand the seriousness of this is incredibly important.

There is not always a blanket ban on allergens. Schools make their own decisions. Some schools in East Dunbartonshire have become a nut-free zone, but that does not have to be the approach that is always taken—it depends on the specific risk being managed. However, reporting in the media is an important part of how we look at allergies, and food allergy and food intolerance are often conflated. Food intolerance, in particular, can get a pretty bad press.

We know that it is an issue at the school gates and on play dates, where parents of children with allergies can be viewed as neurotic or over-protective. Eating out can be a minefield. Improvements have been made in food labelling over the years, thanks largely to the European Union, which has driven that. Now the key allergens are listed in bold on the back of packets—they are very clearly marked. Indeed, since the 2014 regulations came in, we have the right to that information when eating out, about what food ingredients are going into what we are about to eat.
[Jo Swinson]

Restaurants, however, can easily become complacent. We had a prosecution, thankfully, which showed at least that the criminal justice system would take this seriously. An Indian restaurant owner, who had a cavalier attitude to safety, was jailed for manslaughter after a customer died from a nut allergy, because the restaurant had taken the liberty of swapping almond powder for a cheaper one containing peanuts and had not included that information on the menu.

Just a few months ago, top chef Raymond Blanc was at the BBC Good Food Show. He said:

“We are a kitchen not a hospital. Of course, now, if you don’t have an allergy, you’re nobody... It’s a very great fashion to have a food intolerance.”

I really think we do not need comments like that. They rather undermine his other claims to take diners with allergies seriously.

That attitude is really familiar to people with allergies. There is either the excessive response: “Well, you’ve got an allergy. We cannot possibly serve you, because we can’t guarantee anything, so, frankly, just go away and never eat out.” Or there is the response, equivalent to that eye-roll, which assumes that someone is making a fuss about nothing, and then people do not check the ingredients properly and that is when fatalities can happen. Many hon. Members will be aware of the case of Amy May Shead who, in 2014, was left with permanent brain damage when she suffered anaphylactic shock and cardiac arrest after consuming a dish that contained nuts in a restaurant when she was on holiday.

I have also raised the issue of parents of children with allergies being afraid when flying abroad, because they are worried about an allergic reaction happening in the air. I raised that at Transport questions and recently met campaigners and the Minister for aviation to discuss how to take that forward. Part of this is also about the air hostesses and air hosts on the plane having a wider understanding of allergies, so that they do not have the kind of really insensitive reactions that were reported by some parents. In one case, somebody made requests for an announcement to be made and had been deemed to be an over-protective parent. When the child and his mum got off the flight, the air host said, “See, we didn’t kill you, did we?” When we hear stories like that, we realise how far we have to go in raising awareness. This is quite a difficult issue to categorise. There are issues around health, education, transport and media, so it requires cross-governmental working.

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): Is it not the case that it is impossible to separate the question of allergies in schools from wider paediatric allergy support in the communities? Thepostcode lotteries are creating problems with access to suitable specialist support, as well as blood tests and so on. The work of the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care needs to go hand in hand.

Jo Swinson: I absolutely concur with the hon. Gentleman. I would argue that this is a public health issue that needs to involve all Government Departments. I thank him for the important work he does with the all-party parliamentary group on allergy. Perhaps I will spy in the Chamber a few hon. Members whom we might approach to become members of that group.

Some schools take the action of banning nuts on the premises following a risk assessment. When that happened in Exeter a few months ago, we were greeted by this headline on the Mail Online:

“The only nut ban should be the head”: Parents blast primary headteacher’s ‘ridiculous’ proposal to completely ban nuts from school grounds”.

That focuses on the anger and outrage of parents, rather than the potential threat to the lives of children in the school. These articles are often written in a way that encourages outrage on the part of readers, as if children with allergies are somehow an inconvenience to everybody else.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for informing us on this subject. I do not have a nut allergy, nor do I know anyone with a nut allergy, but I have met people who are concerned not just about allergies in school, but about other medical conditions such as diabetes. They are concerned about the ability of staff to be available to help if a child gets into difficulties at school. The issue is not only training for schools, but monitoring and enforcement, perhaps by Ofsted, to ensure that those training plans are in place and that kids can have access to everything, including sports and all the other things that they would like to do in school.

Jo Swinson: I quite agree with the hon. Lady. Indeed, my sister has had type 1 diabetes from a very young age. The ability of schools to incorporate children with a range of conditions and ensure there is wider awareness, so that those children can play a full part in the life of the school, is really important.

On Friday, Sony’s new film “Peter Rabbit” will be released in the UK. The villain of the piece, Tom McGregor, is allergic to blackberries. One scene in the movie shows the rabbits—our beloved Peter Rabbit—deliberately pelting a blackberry into Tom’s mouth with a slingshot. Tom goes into anaphylactic shock, before stabbing himself with an EpiPen and then collapsing.

What do we make of that? I suppose we could argue that it shows that allergies can be dangerous, but I would take the view that for a popular children’s character to be light-heartedly encouraging behaviour that threatens the life of someone else, who is at risk of anaphylaxis, is unacceptable. Imagine that there was a scenario in which Peter Rabbit decided to start throwing knives at someone. We would not think that was acceptable viewing for young children in the cinema. What message does this send to children about how we treat people who have allergies and anaphylaxis? What message is going to be taken by the children who go to see that film and who have an allergy?

Apparently, Sony recognises that food allergies are a serious issue and that its film “should not have made light” of Peter Rabbit's Arch-nemesis being allergic to blackberries, “even in a cartoonish...way.”

However, it is that cartoonish, slapstick portrayal that is the problem—it trivialises allergies in that way. I have written to Sony to request that in addition to that
apology, that scene should be cut from the film when it is released. I think it has done that in one country. I hope that the Minister will add his voice to that request, because the truth is that children suffering from allergies experience that kind of onslaught in school.

Allergy bullying is a real problem. According to a recent study, more than one third of children and teens with food allergies have been bullied specifically because of their food allergies, usually by classmates. Sometimes that includes physical threats with foods. The consequences can be fatal. Last year, Karan Cheema, a 13-year-old boy, died from a severe allergic reaction to cheese. Reports say that he was being bullied and that classmates might have flicked cheese at him or rubbed cheese on his neck. That sort of allergy bullying happens all the time. Only this weekend I saw a tweet from another worried parent whose son, aged nine, was confronted by an 11-year-old threatening to throw a Snickers bar in his mouth. Two years previously, the same boy had threatened to throw peanuts at that little boy during a football session. We see more stories of allergy bullying in schools. It is far too much of a problem, and it needs to be addressed.

Schools have an important role to play in raising awareness. The spare EpiPens in schools project is positive, but more needs to be done through first aid training, health and safety training and raising awareness in schools of food allergy, and, indeed, other allergies. I hope that the Minister can give us more details about how his Department can help schools to get this right, so that children who have allergies and their classmates, are well-equipped to deal with these issues, and so that children do not feel ostracised or are bullied because they have this particular health condition.

Excellent work has been done by organisations such as Allergy UK and the Anaphylaxis Campaign, to look at how schools can improve the work that they do. Allergy UK has produced the school allergy action group toolkit, to help with awareness policies. Those efforts are to be commended. I hope that the Minister agrees with that.

In conclusion, changing people’s attitudes is never easy. It requires persistence and an holistic approach across Government. We face considerable challenges in altering perceptions of allergy in the media, in the school playground, in restaurants and right across society. Incorporating allergy and anaphylaxis awareness into first aid training as part of a new-look personal, social and health and economic education would be an excellent start. Training on these issues within teacher training would also be helpful. I hope that the Minister will enlighten us further on what he and his colleagues in other Departments can do to improve this issue.

4.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) on securing this debate. I would like to thank everyone present for their contributions to this valuable discussion.

I have twins who are now 21, one of whom is asthmatic. The hon. Lady spoke passionately about how the media handle this stuff. Yes, Sony has apologised, but I have looked at some of the comments linked to those media stories with people saying, “What’s the big deal? This is just a cartoon—a CGI movie. Get a life!” Actually, it is about life. Sometimes we have to step back for a second and not be so selfish as to think that everybody without an allergy has the right to everything, while people with allergies should be excluded.

The hon. Lady spoke about transport. British Airways no longer provides nuts on its flights, which I think is the right thing to do. I do not have a nut allergy—I love eating nuts—but I am in no way concerned that it has taken them off the menu. Think about the number of flights, children and holidays—that is a better way of doing things, and it provides lots of other nutritious and good food.

In the short time that I have been in post as Minister for Children and Families, I have been truly inspired by the commitment shown, at all levels in the school sector, to children from a wide range of backgrounds and with a wide range of needs. I have visited early years providers and local authorities and seen the exemplary work that many of them are undertaking to support some of our most vulnerable children and members of society. Colleagues mentioned the inspection regime. Under its inspection framework, Ofsted requires inspectors to pay particular attention to children with allergies and to gather evidence about pupil welfare and how well needs are met by individual schools, and it will evaluate the experience of particular individuals and groups, including those with medical needs.

Rachael Maskell: At the moment it is completely voluntary for schools to hold an EpiPen. Will the Minister look into ensuring that all schools have such devices?

Nadhim Zahawi: Currently, governing boards have an obligation to put forward a clear strategy for what a school is doing for children with allergies. My understanding is that they have to have two EpiPens, not one—one and a spare—but I will hold a roundtable to look at what more we can do to ensure that happens in every school.1

Our vision is that every child, no matter what their background or ability, should play an active part in their school community. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire mentioned that just because a child happens to have an allergy, they should not feel excluded from a trip, visit or any other activity at school. We want all children to reach their full potential and to receive the right support to succeed in their education and as they move into adult life. We recognise the importance of supporting pupils with medical conditions at school, and I share her concerns about instances of poor practice that have the potential to place pupils at risk.

With regards to statutory duty, in the Children and Families Act 2014 we introduced a duty on governing boards of schools in England to make arrangements to

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support pupils with medical conditions. That is a clear signal to schools that supporting pupils with medical conditions is important. I hope that through the roundtable we can see how to improve that further.

The guidance is based on existing best practice and sets clear expectations on schools. It covers a range of areas, including the preparation and implementation of school policies for supporting pupils with medical conditions and the use of individual care plans. It also covers staff training, medicines administration, consulting with parents and collaborative working with healthcare professionals.

The Government understand that food allergies can be complex and worrying for parents. That is why we have set out minimum standards for school food through legislation, with the latest school food standards having come into force in January 2015. We expect headteachers, school governors and their caterers to make effective decisions about their school food policies that take into account the needs of all their pupils.

I want to address an issue that has not come up in the debate but is equally important. Schools have a legal requirement to offer free school meals to all pupils in reception, year 1 or year 2 whose parents want them, and we expect them to make every effort to ensure that pupils with allergies are able to benefit from that entitlement.

In all but exceptional circumstances, schools and their caterers are expected to take into account factors such as the type of diet required by the child with allergies, the number of children in a similar position and the cost of making suitable foods.

Like many colleagues, I was shocked and horrified to hear about Karan, who sadly passed away. The case is under investigation, so it is difficult for me to say too much about it. However, it is important to remember that this case could have been bullying. The hon. Lady was right to condemn the messaging to young people that it is okay to tease other children over their allergies and that it is a bit of harmless fun. That is completely wrong.

In conclusion, I am grateful to the hon. Lady for bringing this issue to Parliament today. We have much to do and I hope that through the roundtable we will see improvements in the future. I look forward to hearing the hon. Member's concluding remarks.

Question put and agreed to.
The award of the World cup seems a reasonable place to start. In 2010, when Russia and Qatar secured the 2018 and 2022 World cups respectively, those decisions were controversial, and they continue to be so for many reasons. However, we do not often talk about the important, intangible benefits that the World cup can bring. The 2018 World cup will be the first hosted in eastern Europe, and the 2022 World cup will be the first hosted in the middle east, and only the second in Asia. Prior to that, other than when it was in South Africa in 2010, the global tournament has been anything but global.

The World cup, and other mega-sporting events, is an incredible way to bring people of different nationalities and cultures together to bond over a simple shared love, especially in difficult times. Qatar’s World cup will allow people to learn first hand about the Arab world—and vice versa—who might not have done so otherwise.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I draw hon. Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, as I travelled to Qatar last month. Migrant workers are involved in building infrastructure and stadiums for the forthcoming World cup in 2022, and a lot of those stadiums will be sent to third-world countries and developing countries in places such as Africa after the World cup, so that children there can benefit from that infrastructure as well. Does my hon. Friend share my enthusiasm for that?

Alex Norris: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful intervention, which I completely agree with. I will talk about legacy shortly.

I feel strongly about this issue, and I co-chair the newly formed all-party parliamentary group on sport, modern slavery and human rights, which focuses on mega-sporting events and their impact on host communities, as my hon. Friend talked about. Growing up in Manchester, I saw at first hand the transformation that the Commonwealth games had on the city. We should hope to see that sort of legacy from all these events. I encourage hon. Members to come to the all-party group’s events—we have one on Monday—if they wish to participate further in that.

Qatar’s population followed its economy in increasing, from just under 600,000 at the turn of the millennium to around 2.6 million today. Most of that increase comes from migration, with 88% of the population made up of migrants from countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh and the Philippines. That has worked well for the Government and for business owners, but for the workers, conditions have often been dire. Although the acquisition of the World cup brought global attention and pressure, workers’ conditions are still not at a standard that we would expect for ourselves. As we talk about the positive developments, we have to bear that in mind. We must continue to press for improvement.

Until 2016, the kafala system was at the root of the problem. All unskilled migrant workers were subject to it, as they are in much of the middle east. The system linked workers to an in-country sponsor, who was responsible for their visa and legal status. It was described by Amnesty International as a system that “facilitates forced labour and a range of other abuses.”

As the home of football, we would not want that tied to the beautiful game. In 2014, four years after the successful World cup bid, that was just one of nine exploitation issues that Amnesty highlighted for urgent reform.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I also direct hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, because I travelled to Qatar last month. When I visited, I was pleased to hear about the improvements made to workers’ rights and labour reforms. The International Labour Organisation has stated that workers “enjoy better protection” and has agreed to open an office to oversee the reforms. What more can the UK do to support Qatar in that process?

Alex Norris: I thank my hon. Friend for that constructive intervention and for her insights. At the end I will come to, not necessarily what more can be done, but a list of the current plans, which we must support. On paper they are very good, and if we can make the reality match the rhetoric, something good indeed will have happened, but I will talk about the background first, so we understand the context.

The other issues that Amnesty highlighted were the exit permit system, which allows employers to stop workers leaving the country, the lack of protection for domestic workers in labour law, and the late or non-payment of wages to migrant workers.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I visited Qatar on a delegation in 2014, and I was appalled by the workers’ poor living and working conditions. My hon. Friend is helpfully setting out some of the concerns. My understanding is that some things have improved since 2014, but there is still the routine non-payment of wages, and agencies in the sending country give false expectations about salaries and charge exorbitant fees. Although conditions might have improved on World cup stadium sites, health and safety on other construction sites is still very poor. How can those things be improved?

Alex Norris: It is important to remember that although the World cup will get the most focus, because of its global interest, it does not make up the majority of construction. There is a lot of development going on, and we must look at those other developments to ensure that the positive changes from the World cup are extended. It is no coincidence that when my hon. Friend and others went on their delegations, things started to get better. That is why I wanted to secure the debate.

Paula Sherriff: It is clear that significant improvements have been made to workers’ rights in Qatar, hopefully with more to come. Does my hon. Friend agree that many other countries in the region, including in the Gulf, need to mirror those improvements? Clearly, Qatar is leading the way in the region.

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend has slightly tipped off my grand finale, because the important point is that what is secured and achieved in Qatar needs to spread out to neighbouring countries that still have that relationship to the kafala system. If we do that, we will have secured something in this struggle.

The last couple of issues that Amnesty highlighted were harsh and dangerous working conditions, obstacles to access to justice, the denial of the right to form a trade union—something very basic and fundamental to us in this country—and the failed enforcement of existing labour standards. Many of those issues have now been
addressed and further action is on the horizon, as I shall set out shortly. However, it is worth understanding what they mean, which is that workers are dying. Only last year, a British man from Hove, Zachary Cox, fell to his death when his safety harness failed.

It has been a real challenge—perhaps Ministers can support us in this venture—to get good information on how many people have lost their lives as a result of labour exploitation. Lots of numbers are floating around, but the death toll is certainly in four figures. The Washington Post said that 1,200 had died in construction on World Cup sites alone. That claim has since been picked apart a little, but we know that the real figure is an awful one that will continue to grow unless the change that we must support happens. We have responsibilities, and I certainly feel a responsibility to use this privileged place to talk about the issue.

In December 2016, in response to the outrage about the kafala system and the need to change it, the Qatari Government passed what is known as Law No. 21. It offered many reforms; the Qatari Government said that it would strike a fine balance between the rights of workers, Qatari culture and the needs of Qatari business, promising sweeping and significant reform. However, the view on the ground was that that had not happened. The situation has developed since, but the context is important. Human rights groups have pointed out that the law did not address the power of employers over workers, exit permits or passport confiscations. Some of the changes were a little cosmetic.

Three areas in particular need to be revisited: sponsorship reform, exit permits and passport confiscation. Under Law No. 21, the two-year ban on re-entering Qatar after leaving an employer was replaced with a stay tied to the duration of a contract. That grants a little more freedom but still leaves workers unable to move jobs during a contract, so the protections are not very strong.

With respect to exit permits, workers were required under the 2009 sponsorship law to have express permission from their employers in order to leave the country. That violated the universal declaration of human rights, the international convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination, and the Arab charter on human rights—all of which Qatar is a signatory to. The Qatari Government has said that under the new law, “freedom of movement is explicitly guaranteed”. However, Amnesty International has said that, “their employers will still be able to stop them going home.” As per the UN special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, the exit permit system applies to few, if any, migrant workers, and “does not justify the pre-emptive punishment of thousands.”

Again, we need to look at that.

Passport confiscation used to be illegal in Qatar and could result in a fine, although in practice it rarely did. Employers are now permitted to confiscate passports, although there is a potential fine for breach of conditions. Amnesty International has raised concerns about that.

I do not think the new law reaches the level of sweeping and significant reform, and there is clearly much to do. However, significant progress has been reported, and it is important that we acknowledge it, as hon. Members have done. We need to give the Qatari Government the credit they deserve and, hopefully, support them in going all the way. Significantly and helpfully, the UN International Labour Organisation, which my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) referred to, has agreed to partner with the Qatari Government to implement true reforms. The Qatari ambassador to the UK has assured me that those reforms will “strengthen protections” for the “expatriate community, so that their freedom and rights are secure.”

Again, we will be very interested to see them.

Another measure that the Qatari Government are trying to introduce is the implementation of a wage protection system, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) said, which would require wages for workers to be paid locally. The ILO describes the system as “a positive measure which, if implemented effectively, could contribute to addressing the recurring issue of the non-payment...of wages.”

Yet another measure is the introduction of a temporary minimum wage—a matter that we in this country feel very strongly about—while an assessment is carried out to determine a fixed minimum wage. Workers must also receive accommodation, food and healthcare from their employers, but again, it is important that we ensure that that happens across all development, as well as on World Cup sites.

The domestic workers law sets out several rights for workers, including the right to terminate employment, along with provisions on holidays, end-of-service bonuses, improved access to justice and penalties for violations. Construction of brand-new accommodation for workers is ongoing, and I know that visiting delegations have shown a real interest in it. A national committee for combating human trafficking has been established. Bilateral agreements have been reached, and other work has been done with origin countries to combat the issue at source, including licensing of recruitment agencies. There has also been increased inspection and enforcement of housing and working conditions.

These are good reforms that would make things better for a lot of people, so it is really important that they are followed through. I spoke to Amnesty only this morning, and its response is still a little mixed, especially with respect to sponsorship, so it is clearly an issue to look into further. I am delighted that the Qatari Government have asked to meet me, and I will raise all these points with them. I believe we have a duty—I certainly feel a personal duty—to keep asking questions and asking for evidence to ensure that the reforms are delivered.

Amnesty, Unite and Caabu—the Council for Arab-British Understanding—have all supported me in identifying plenty of issues that need to be resolved. They have made it clear that there has been an obvious difference and that action has been taken. Other organisations have given similar praise. The general secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation, Sharan Burrow, has praised the start of real reforms in Qatar which will bring to an end the use of modern slavery and puts the country on the pathway to meeting its international legal obligations on workers’ rights.

There is a real prize here. I slightly buried the lede when I answered the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), but if pressure
and improvements in Qatar mean that standards are pushed up across the region—in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Oman and Bahrain—we will have achieved something really important. It will all have started from the visits and the interest of Unite and others. By going there, going into cupboards and looking at security harnesses in the way that trade unionists do, they will have achieved something exceptional on a regional scale.

I thank my friends at Amnesty, Caabu and Unite for helping to develop my work in the area and helping me with this debate. As a result of their efforts, lives will be saved and improved. I know that they will be keen to stay the course to ensure that the reality matches the rhetoric. I will certainly do my bit.

I have gone through quite a lot of the timeline, but the most important part is still to come. It is important that we recognise the progress that has been made, but in the spirit of friendship and, most importantly, solidarity with Qatari workers, we need to press for more—to press for the job to be finished. We must offer whatever co-operation we can to support that. I am looking forward to a 22-year-old Phil Foden leading England to World cup glory in 2022—he will probably be Manchester City captain by then.

Gill Furniss: Never going to happen.

Alex Norris: It is certainly going to happen. More importantly, I hope that, long before then, we will see a Qatar in which 1.7 million workers have the rights and protections that they deserve.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) on securing it and on setting the scene so comprehensively.

I have been a massive football fan all my life. For those who do not know, I am a Leicester City supporter and have been for 48 years, since long before they won the premier league—we never used to have much to celebrate. I am interested in football and obviously I am interested in Qatar, which will host the 2022 World cup. I wait for each World cup with great anticipation. We do not see as much of them as we would like to, but watching them is something to enjoy with family and friends—there is a real buzz about it. Sadly, unlike some people, I have never been able to predict exactly which country will win each group and which will ultimately win the cup, but I always hope that it will be one of the home nations. That is what I look forward to.

In the build-up to the 2022 World cup, however, joy has turned to shock because of the alleged treatment of the workers who are building the stadiums and facilities. I do not think the hon. Gentleman cited a figure, but some newspapers say that more than 1,200 people have so far died while building the stadiums and facilities. Although we are in no way responsible for health and safety executives around the world, I believe we have an international obligation to ensure that in an event that hosts our football teams, the competition is carried out to an adequate standard.

A BBC article states:

“Living and working conditions for some migrants in Qatar are appalling. Long hours in the blazing heat, low pay and squalid dormitories, are a daily ordeal for thousands—and they cannot leave without an exit visa...And many workers have died.”

The article cites “a report by the International Trades Union Confederation, called The Case Against Qatar. The ITUC went to the embassies of Nepal and India, two countries which are the source of many of the migrant workers who go to Qatar”, although not all of them. It continues:

“Those embassies had counted more than 400 deaths a year between them—a total of 1,239 deaths in the three years to the end of 2013.”

On Tuesday, I watched an exposé on the morning news about Qatar, obesity and the rise of diabetes. It has been said that the World cup will bring lots of opportunities for sport, and the people of Qatar have been encouraged to get involved in sport to reduce diabetes. That is Qatar’s plan, but this debate is about what is happening to the workers, which is shocking. It is past time that labour relations were brought up to an acceptable standard. The building industry is obviously building more than World cup-related facilities, but the fact that construction is part of the strategy to provide infrastructure to host the games means that we have some level of obligation. That is why we are here today; I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham North on setting the scene and on giving us the opportunity to participate in the debate.

Reforms have been proposed, including setting a minimum wage and allowing workers to leave the country without their employer’s permission by using exit visas. There now seems to be a willingness to continue to make improvements and we welcome that; it is a step in the right direction. It is also necessary, and we must do our part through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and UN representatives, to ensure that this process continues, for the sake of all those who leave their home to provide a living for their family but face the possibility of not returning home.

Those who come from Nepal, Tibet or other countries are not heading off to war; they are heading off to a building site and therefore they expect to come home. And whenever 1,239 workers do not return home, you know something? We ask questions and I believe this House has a responsibility to ask those questions through our Minister and our Government.

To conclude, I am pleased that some reforms have been made, but I urge our Minister, given the position and the power that he has, to put some pressure on Qatar to ensure that the reforms are carried through and go further. We must do what we can to increase the diplomatic pressure, to see changes for the better. Our Minister is very active; he is very responsive to debates and go further. W e must do what we can to increase the diplomatic pressure, to see changes for the better. Our Minister is very active; he is very responsive to debates and go further. W e must do what we can to increase the diplomatic pressure, to see changes for the better. Our Minister is very active; he is very responsive to debates and go further. W e must do what we can to increase the diplomatic pressure, to see changes for the better. Our Minister is very active; he is very responsive to debates and go further. W e must do what we can to increase the diplomatic pressure, to see changes for the better. Our Minister is very active; he is very responsive to debates and go further. W e must do what we can to increase the diplomatic pressure, to see changes for the better. Our Minister is very active; he is very responsive to debates and go further. W e must do what we can to increase the diplomatic pressure, to see changes for the better. Our Minister is very active; he is very responsive to debates and go further. W e must do what we can to increase the diplomatic pressure, to see changes for the better. Our Minister is very active; he is very responsive to debates and go further. W e must do what we can to increase the diplomatic pressure, to see changes for the better. Our Minister is very active; he is very responsive to debates and go further. W e must do what we can to increase the diplomatic pressure, to see changes for the better. Our Minister is very active; he is very responsive to debates and go further.
I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), not just on obtaining the debate but because it is, as he rightly said, on a very important issue. I also congratulate him on the way in which he presented the arguments, which I thought was exceptionally fair and even-handed.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there is little to be served by our standing here in Westminster delivering pious sermons, not least because although we have within our own legal systems good standards of labour rights, they are not universal and they are not always applied. I think back, during my time in this House, to the tragic deaths of the cockle pickers on Morecambe Bay. I am the MP for Orkney and Shetland, so I have very close links to the fishing industry. I know that some truly appalling incidents have been reported of migrant crews from outside the European economic area and the conditions in which they have worked in our own country in recent years. So we must approach this subject with a bit of humility, and that is exactly what the hon. Gentleman did.

I should also declare an interest, as the chair of the all-party parliamentary British-Qatar group. Twice in recent years I have visited Qatar; it is outlined in my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I say to the hon. Gentleman and to all others in the Chamber that they are most welcome to engage with the all-party group. We have regular contact with the Qatari embassy here and I have also made it my business to engage with human rights non-governmental organisations that are working in the region. The last visit to Qatar that I was part of was in February 2017. We were hosted by the British embassy in Doha and we met a number of the human rights NGOs and other campaigning organisations working in the region.

We have challenged the Qataris on many occasions in relation to the matters that the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is from the Democratic Unionist party, have raised. There is no point in pulling our punches; we add no value if we stand here as apologists, or as people explaining the inadequacies in the systems that we find in other countries. However, I say to the House that on all the occasions when we have raised, tackled and quite robustly put to the Qataris the shortcomings that have been identified, I have always found in them a willingness to engage, and as we have seen in recent years, that engagement has resulted in significant progress.

In particular, in entering into the three-year programme of technical co-operation with the International Labour Organisation, Qatar has done something that I hope will produce the sort of change within the system that we all want to see. We have already seen the abolition of the kafala system and the introduction of a temporary minimum wage, as the hon. Member for Nottingham North said.

Most importantly, from my experience of engaging with the Qatari Government I am encouraged by the establishment of the national committee for combating human trafficking. I say that because I have engaged in recent times with the National Human Rights Committee in Qatar, which is a body set up by the Government but independent of the Government. If the committee for combating human trafficking is allowed and able to operate in the same way as the human rights committee does, I suggest that there is significant opportunity for making the sort of progress that we want to see in Qatar.

It is almost a heresy for a Scotsman to say this, but I am absolutely indifferent on the subject of football. The World cup holds little joy for me, or indeed probably—in all sincerity—for many Scotsmen when it comes to the subject of our own national team’s prospects. However, I have always been quite struck by the vision that underpins the idea of the first Arab World cup. It is a quite remarkable vision that Qatar has. If Qatar is to justify it, and do it justice, it will have to come up to the mark on labour rights and other human rights.

That gives the Qataris a real opportunity. With every major sporting occasion, we always speak about a legacy. It is my sincere hope, and it is an aspiration that I know is shared by many in Qatar itself, that the legacy of the 2022 World cup may be that the standard of labour rights and human rights, which will bear scrutiny in the future, will mean that the recent history of Qatar that we have seen—the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) witnessed it for herself—will genuinely be consigned to history.

[Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Thank you, Sir Christopher, for giving me the opportunity to speak, and I also thank the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) for securing this debate. There have been many jokes about the World cup, but I am looking forward to 2022, when Scotland are victorious in the final against England.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I am a proud member of that international organisation called the trade union movement. I think there were three key themes in his contribution: what is happening; what we can do to promote sustainable development and the fight against poverty, injustice and inequality internationally; and what we can do to promote best practice here in the United Kingdom.

Those are certainly the themes that I want to pick up, because, as the hon. Gentleman said, in October last year the Government in Qatar committed to reforms to improve significantly the physical and employment situation of 2 million migrant workers, including ending the kafala system, which has already been referred to and which the International Trade Union Confederation had described as modern slavery. Those concessions by the Qatari Government were reported by state media and announced just before the International Labour Organisation was due to decide whether to hold a formal commission of inquiry into conditions in Qatar for migrant workers.

The human rights abuses that we have seen—workers being tied to a single employer, low pay, poor accommodation, labouring in dangerous heat and, sadly, hundreds of unexplained deaths—have been subject to intense global scrutiny and criticism. Foreign workers can only come to the Arab Gulf states through a sponsor, as the hon. Gentleman said. However, the essence of that kafala system was the relationship binding the employee to the employer, which has often been criticised as being like slavery, because the employer could dictate the recruitment process and working conditions, while workers were often forced to pay their own medical insurance fees and surrender their passports and identification papers.
Much work has been done, not only here but in the Scottish Parliament, in relation to how we can make a contribution to sustainable development and the fight against poverty, injustice and inequality internationally. Scotland’s First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, pledged to implement the global goals and made a dual commitment to tackle poverty and inequality at home in Scotland and to help developing countries grow in a fair and sustainable manner. Our commitment to contribute internationally to the global goals must reflect and mirror our domestic aims and ambitions for Scotland. That includes building the economy; tackling poverty and inequality; providing quality healthcare and education; promoting affordable and clean energy; and ensuring a sustainable environment. I am sure that we all want to play our part in contributing to the development of our partner countries through those global goals.

The international framework and international development strategy agreed in the Scottish Parliament have set the direction for Scotland’s international activity. It sets out the priorities that will contribute to Scotland’s ongoing ambition to be a good global citizen and to make distinctive contributions in addressing global challenges. We should recognise that businesses have a crucial role to play in preventing and remediating breaches of human rights. Although states, rather than the private sector, have the principal responsibility for respecting and protecting human rights, we can encourage businesses to take positive action, for example by actively managing the risk of being party to human rights abuses. Businesses can exert a direct influence through their trade and investment decisions.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) rightly raised the issue of trafficking and exploitation. In Scotland, a strategy was adopted in May last year that was agreed by Police Scotland, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. That is an important strategy. A number of case studies were produced to show what human trafficking involved and the impact it had on victims. A number of people who had been subjected to human trafficking played their part in developing that strategy.

To conclude, the hon. Member for Nottingham North said that we should promote best practice at home. There are some areas where the UK can help. It can certainly help by looking at how to provide better workplace protection for people in the gig economy. I ask the Government to look seriously at my Workers (Definition and Rights) Bill, which seeks to do that. We certainly need to look at parts of our economy where there are exploitative zero-hours contracts. We need to show that we in the UK lead by example when it comes to workers’ rights and human rights across the globe.

In my hon. Friend’s introductory speech, he said that the treatment of workers must be a priority, and that is where we are starting from this afternoon. He talked about the benefits of holding the World cup finals outside Europe for the first time, and I agree with him on that, although like the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) I am no great football fan. Clearly, it will benefit football, the people of that region and all who take part in the competition.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North said that workers’ conditions are not what we would accept in the United Kingdom, and I totally agree with him. That is why we are having this debate. He said that it is the responsibility of MPs to draw attention to abuses in places such as Qatar, and that is exactly what he has done so well this afternoon. He concluded his speech by saying that lives will be saved and improved, and we have to recognise the progress that has been made, although there is much still to be done.

My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I hope he does not mind me calling him my hon. Friend, but every time I speak in this place, he is there making a contribution, and we have got to know each other well over the years—pointed to the level of exploitation we have had in the construction industry. He also spoke about workers’ rights in Qatar because it is hosting the World cup. He said his concern is for the workers, and I certainly agree with him.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland said that we need to approach this subject with some humility because perhaps we are not perfect here in the United Kingdom, and of course he is right. He is the chair of the all-party parliamentary British-Qatar group. He pointed out that although he is indifferent to the World cup itself, Qatar is important to him. I will certainly take up his offer to attend some of the meetings of the all-party group.

As we have heard today, Qatar is home to 1.7 million migrant workers as of 2015. Some 40% of those workers are employed in the construction sector. I hate to quote the Daily Mail, but I will, because in 2015 it highlighted the lack of a minimum wage, with some workers, such as carpenters, paid as little as 36p an hour. That is disgraceful. By 2017, more than 1,200 migrant workers had been killed in Qatar in the construction industry and other industries and trades since it was awarded the 2022 World cup finals. Many are still working on building sites in potentially life-threatening heat and humidity. Ultimately, the Government of Qatar are responsible for the human rights abuses occurring there. That is what Amnesty International said in 2017. Qatar began implementing reforms to migrant workers’ rights to head off a potentially embarrassing inquiry by the International Labour Organisation before the 2022 World cup.

Following international criticism, Qatar agreed in 2014 to bring in reforms including a minimum wage and reform to the kafala system, about which we have heard a great deal this afternoon. I will not add to what has been said about that, but I draw Members’ attention to some of the abuses that workers have had to suffer. Contractors withhold workers’ passport and personal documents so they cannot leave the country. Workers need permission from their employer to leave Qatar. Workers are often housed in unsanitary camps, sleeping in small dormitory rooms, some with more than 20 people to a room—imagine that. Employers have refused
permission for any form of inspection of those facilities. Many workers are paid less than £1 an hour. While Qatar may have a cheaper cost of living than the UK, it is not that much cheaper. We often hear that domestic violence is common in those conditions.

I am told that Qatar is spending $500 million a week on World cup-related infrastructure projects, including the construction or restoration of eight stadiums, hotels, transportation and other facilities. FIFA, the international football organisation, has stated that it “seeks to prevent or mitigate adverse human rights impacts” in relation to World cup projects.

Many Members will know that in the past nine months there has been a blockade of Qatar by some of its neighbours: Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and, most importantly, Saudi Arabia. When I visited the country in February, I was told that that has acted as a catalyst to increase the pace and speed of reforms. Whether that is true or not, only time will tell.

In August 2017, the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamin bin Hamad Al Thani, ratified Law No. 15 on service workers working in the home. It is the first law that grants labour protections for Qatar’s 175,000 domestic workers, and we must not forget them. In talking about construction, let us not forget domestic workers, who often receive far more abuse than even those on construction sites. Under the law, employers would not be allowed to withhold personal documents. However, migrant workers would continue to require permission to leave the country, as they would be required to notify their employer, and I guess permission could be withheld.

When I was in Qatar I had the privilege of meeting Ambassador Faisal bin Abdullah Al-Henzab, who is the director of the human rights department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He speaks extremely good English, having represented his country in many parts of the world including, most recently, Geneva. He told me that the International Labour Organisation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North pointed out, finished its inquiry in November 2017, in response to the Qatar Government’s expressed reform commitments and legislative actions. ILO director general, Guy Ryder, said:

“The ILO welcomes the commitment of Qatar to engage in substantive cooperation with the Organization for the promotion and protection of workers’ rights, and looks forward to the successful implementation of the cooperation programme over the next three years”.

The United Kingdom ambassador to Qatar in Doha, Ajay Sharma, confirmed that the pace of reform is speeding up, partly in response to the boycott and the crisis, as the Qataris call it. Of course, we warmly welcome that.

We believe that the labour reforms are a positive result of international pressure on Qatar, as many Members have pointed out, including the mover of this afternoon’s motion. Human Rights Watch called them “a step in the right direction”, but highlighted the fact that “their implementation will be the decisive factor”.

The ILO report that I mentioned earlier is also a little vague. For example, it states that a minimum wage will be adopted by Qatar without stipulating when, what it will be, and how it will be enforced. Qatar remains unique among its peers in the Gulf for implementing the ILO recommendations, but as Amnesty International said, the ILO and the international community must continue to scrutinise Qatar’s record on migrant labour abuse.

As has been said this afternoon, the reforms are warmly welcomed, but much more needs to be done. We will be watching, encouraging and—I hope—helping the Government of Qatar to implement those reforms so that they can lead the region. Perhaps other countries in the region will follow.

5.11 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I genuinely thank the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) for securing today’s debate. On behalf of the entire House, I wish the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) a very happy birthday. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East is currently elsewhere on ministerial duties, so it is my pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government.

Working conditions in other countries obviously matter to us—not just for their own sake, but to give British workers employed in other countries confidence that they will be properly protected. The tragic death of Zachary Cox in Qatar last year has once again focused public attention on the working conditions there, particularly in the construction industry. May I, as I am sure we all do, extend sincere condolences once again to his family?

I would like to set out what the main concerns about labour conditions in Qatar have been, what steps the Qatari Government have been taking to address them, and what the UK Government have been doing to support reforms there. Public attention, as has been mentioned, was drawn to the working conditions in Qatar, and particularly the conditions endured by the mainly migrant workforce on construction sites, when Qatar won the competition to host the 2022 football World cup just over seven years ago. It would be wise of me to say nothing about my own enthusiasm for football or, if I were to be honest, lack of it.

In 2014, the International Labour Organisation raised a complaint against Qatar concerning the non-observance of the forced labour convention. As we have heard today, the ILO had particular concerns about the kafala, an Arabic term meaning, essentially, “sponsorship system”. The kafala gives responsibility for migrant workers’ visas and legal status to their sponsors in many Gulf countries. The practice has been widely criticised by human rights organisations because of concerns that it could leave workers open to exploitation. We believe that there are clear examples where that has definitely been the case. There have been reports that more than one million migrant workers in Qatar might be subject to kafala.

Following the ILO complaint, the Qatari Ministry of Labour commenced to a number of reforms, including introducing laws to end the kafala. The Ministry also undertook to take other steps that go beyond the minimum required to address the ILO’s concerns. As well as changes to legislation to address the kafala system, the Ministry has made a number of specific commitments, which include addressing three main concerns. First, it
has committed to improve health screening and access to healthcare for migrant workers. Secondly, it has committed to introduce a minimum wage. Thirdly, it has committed to establish a fund to help workers with their salaries in the event that an employer goes bankrupt.

In addition to those commitments, the Qataris have reformed the process for migrant workers leaving the country, and introduced an electronic wage payment scheme. They have also built new accommodation for the foreign labour force, and increased their health and safety inspection capability. Qatar has also introduced legislation to offer legal protection to domestic workers, and has made efforts to improve recruitment practices in workers’ countries of origin. That means that employers should in future hire only through independently monitored agencies to carry out regular audits and inspections of construction sites. It signed a memorandum of understanding with the Building and Wood Workers’ International union—the BWI—18 months ago, and has been conducting joint worksite inspections with the BWI, to assess the standards for construction workers involved in all World cup projects. The committee is also inspecting the accommodation provided for the workers, to ensure that it is fit for them to live in.

Qatar has taken other practical steps to improve the situation for migrant workers. The supreme committee for delivery and legacy for the World cup has been working with a number of international companies and agencies to carry out regular audits and inspections of construction sites. It signed a memorandum of understanding with the Building and Wood Workers’ International union—the BWI—18 months ago, and has been conducting joint worksite inspections with the BWI, to assess the standards for construction workers involved in all World cup projects. The committee is also inspecting the accommodation provided for the workers, to ensure that it is fit for them to live in.

The supreme committee and the BWI published their first report in January, which set out a number of observations and recommendations to improve safety standards further. Those recommendations include sharing health records between accommodation and work sites, improving standards in kitchen areas, and trying to prevent workplace injuries. It is clearly vital that all those recommendations are implemented as soon as possible, not least because the number of workers on World cup and associated infrastructure construction projects is likely to reach its peak of almost 2 million later this year.

**Jim Shannon:** The programme that was on TV the other morning referred to Qatar’s having one of the highest levels of income per head in the whole of the Arab world. There really should not be any financial reasons for not doing all the work that the Minister has pointed out. Does he agree that, given the finance that they have available, they should just get the job done?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** As we are discussing today, we want to see high standards, fair pay, and all the guarantees around those two structures, to ensure that people are not exploited and cheated, which appears to have been the case on a number of occasions in the past.

Qatar’s efforts to improve the situation for its migrant workforce have recently been welcomed by the ILO, Human Rights Watch and the International Trade Union Confederation. In fact, in November the ILO decided to close its complaint, in recognition of the progress being made by Qatar to address its concerns. Last October, Qatar and the ILO signed a technical co-operation agreement, which aims to bring Qatar’s labour laws in line with international standards. The agreement will last three years. During that time, an ILO office based in Doha will provide support and monitor progress on reforming labour rights and ending forced labour. That will include further work to improve the working and living conditions for construction workers, ensuring that workers have a voice through an improved grievance system, and tackling issues in recruitment. ILO staff are already working in Qatar ahead of the formal opening of the office in April.

The UK Government are committed to the UN guiding principles on business and human rights, so we welcome the commitments and efforts being made by Qatar. Modern slavery is a particular priority for my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, and she has discussed the issue in detail with His Highness the Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.

The Qataris have shown a willingness to improve workers’ human rights. Last September, Qatar endorsed the Prime Minister’s call to action at the UN General Assembly to end modern slavery. The UK’s close bilateral relationship with Qatar has allowed us not only to raise concerns about working conditions and human rights, but to offer our assistance and expertise. The UK’s recent experience of hosting the Olympics, the Commonwealth games and the rugby world cup means that we have the expertise to help Qatar stage a safe and successful World cup in 2022. That includes improving health and safety on construction sites, as well as designing world-class stadiums and providing British expertise to keep the stadiums cool. We will continue to work with Qatar on labour reform and other issues, such as supporting its 2030 national vision—its ambitious vision to transform and diversify its economy away from the hydrocarbons sector.

Later this month, the Minister for the Middle East will travel to Qatar for talks on strengthening our relationship and to discuss what more we can do to help implement the national vision. At the same time, our embassy in Doha will continue to urge the British business community in Qatar, as well as its contractors and subcontractors, to adhere to the toughest health and safety standards. Our embassy staff have seen at first hand the positive steps that have been taken by Qatar over the past year to improve construction safety standards as well as the wider situation for migrant workers in the country. We will continue to encourage those measures and to follow the significant progress made by the Qatari authorities.

Although a number of challenges remain, we are encouraged by Qatar’s clear commitment to improving the labour conditions of migrant workers. For our part, the UK firmly believes that prosperity and respect for human rights should go hand in hand. We welcome Qatar’s willingness to introduce reforms that will bring their laws into line with international standards. We will continue to work with Qatar to support progress and reform, to give all workers in Qatar confidence to know that their safety, their wellbeing, and their rights will be properly protected.

5.22 pm

**Alex Norris:** I am still a relatively new Member and this is my first hour-long Westminster Hall debate. A few minutes ago, I had the moment that new Members
often have, when I realised I would get the chance, and the obligation, to sum up. Happily, I keep good notes and I am light on my feet, so I suspect I will be able to do so briefly.

My previous two debates were on advice services in Nottingham and voter registration in Nottingham North. They were much more solo ventures than today’s debate, and it has been lovely to have some company. I was slightly thrown because I was expecting the Minister for the Middle East, but I was very excited to see the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) in his place as Minister, because he and I have spent quite a bit of time in the last few weeks on the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill Committee. This gives me another chance to remind him of our enthusiasm for the passing of a Magnitsky-type amendment to that Bill on Report.

Sir Alan Duncan: I would draw the hon. Gentleman’s attention to the commitment made by the Prime Minister in a statement today to table such an amendment, and assure the House that I am working very closely with his party in the hope that we can have a cross-party agreement on that that will give a strong voice from the United Kingdom, particularly given the background of Salisbury.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. I call Alex Norris, on the subject of the debate.

Alex Norris: I thank the Minister for that, but will return to topic.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) put it very aptly when he said that these migrant workers are not going to war but going to work. They are going to a building site and it should be held in that spirit. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for his leadership through the all-party parliamentary group. It is really important to recognise, as many Members have said, that things have got better because people have looked at this, have taken part and have gone and taken time to have difficult conversations. That is how things get better.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) is, like me, a strong trade unionist and an internationalist. He gave us some timely reminders of the challenge at home. I saw him speak last week at an event for his old union, so I am in no doubt that he will press the case strongly.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for his comprehensive speech. It was quite reassuring that our speeches fitted together, so I clearly was not too far off beam. It was really clear about the sort of pressure that we can bring as a country, how we can help raise standards and the impact that that might have in the broader region, which is, as I said earlier, a real prize.

I am grateful to the Minister for talking us through the Government’s position and the connection to modern-day slavery, which is an issue on which Members across the House hold strong opinions.

I appreciate the spirit in which we discussed the issue. I will confess that I was having a couple of beers with a couple of mates last night, watching the football. When I said I was having this debate, they said, “You just want to talk about football, don’t you, Alex?” I do love football—I seem to have got all the enthusiasm from those Members who do not, and combined it in me—but this is not actually about football. It is not about the World cup. That is an emblem of the issue, but it is about people, workers and being able to go to work with the expectation of getting fair pay, getting paid and being safe—something we would all want for ourselves, our friends and our family, and that we should want for everyone around the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered labour reforms in Qatar.

5.25 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 15 March 2018

[MRs Madeleine Moon in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Psychosis: Early Intervention

1.30 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I beg to move, That this House has considered access and waiting time standards for early intervention in psychosis.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, for what I think is the first time. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for facilitating this debate on an issue of real importance and something I care about a lot. I will start with the origins of early intervention in psychosis and then raise my specific concerns about the progress made under the Government’s programme.

The approach dates back to the 1990s. In 1999, the Labour Government decided to give a significant national push to the development of early intervention in psychosis services. There was a mental health policy implementation guide of that date, and at that time the service was to focus on those aged 14 to 35, the years when psychosis was most likely to emerge. Once an individual started their treatment, there was to be a three-year programme. Critical to that was small case loads, so that the professionals in multidisciplinary teams could work closely with the individuals involved. It also involved family interventions. In a 10-year period, the national case load grew to 22,500 for what was widely seen as a valuable innovation.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence review of psychosis and schizophrenia in 2014 concluded that early intervention services, “more than any other services developed to date, are associated with improvements in a broad range of critical outcomes, including relapse rates, symptoms, quality of life and a better experience” for service users. I will return to that later, but an excellent annual report by the Southern Region EIP programme—for the south of England—specifically highlighted the impact on employment rates. When these services have proper investment, people who experience a first episode of psychosis can often be got into employment or education at far higher levels that has traditionally been the case with generic mental health services. That is an enormous prize to be won, when we think about quality of life and sense of self-worth, and indeed the cost of the condition to the state—so, lots of praise for the impact of early intervention services.

The Schizophrenia Commission said that early intervention services were the “great innovation” of the last 10 years, referring to multidisciplinary working, recovery ethos, co-production, working with people with the condition and achieving high standards. Professor Louis Appleby has described the service as the “jewel in the crown of the NHS mental health reform because...service users like it...people get better”—that is important—and “it saves money”, which is also critical.

On that point, we know from analysis that for every £1 properly invested in early intervention in psychosis, there is a return of £15 over subsequent years. Of course, one of the complications is that the return is not just concentrated in reduced use of the NHS, but comes through getting people off benefits and into work, bringing in tax revenues and reducing the number of people who end up going through the criminal justice system. For all those reasons—the impact on individuals and the extraordinary return on investment—this seems like a very good thing to do. However, as the NHS’s finances started to get tighter, there was clearly disinvestment in many places—it varied around the country, but it was happening.

My insight, as Minister responsible for mental health from September 2012, was that two particular elements of the way that the NHS works end up massively disadvantaging mental health. First, there are a set of politically demanding access standards in physical health, such as the four-hour A&E standard, the cancer waiting time standards and the 18-week referral to treatment standards. I do not know if it still happens, but in my time at the Department of Health, every Monday morning all the great and the good of the NHS sat around the Secretary of State’s table with a spreadsheet for every hospital in the country, looking at performance against those waiting time standards—in physical health. There was nothing for mental health—a complete imbalance of rights of access.

Then there is payment by results, which is actually payment for activity. It means that when patients get referred to an acute hospital, that hospital receives more income. There have been adjustments and reforms over the years, but the basic principle of incentivising activity in acute hospitals, which is not matched in mental health, combined with those exacting access standards, puts enormous pressure on the system to drive people into acute hospitals to meet those standards. That has the effect of sucking money into acute hospitals. Even during the last five to seven years of tight finances in the NHS, income for acute hospitals has continued to increase, but income for mental health and community services, which do not have those financial incentives, has stayed level or, in places, decreased.

I felt we had to start addressing those perverse incentives that were disadvantaging mental health, which amount to discrimination against people who experience mental ill health. Why should the treatment for someone who experiences psychosis be in any way inferior to the treatment of someone suffering from cancer or any other physical condition? In 2014, we decided across government to publish a vision called “Achieving Better Access to Mental Health Services by 2020”, a joint publication by the Department of Health and NHS England. The vision was to achieve comprehensive maximum waiting time standards in mental health by 2020—if only. The plan was to start with two standards: a six-week standard for access to the IAPT—improved access to psychological therapies—service and a two-week standard for early intervention in psychosis.

Critically, this was not just a two-week standard. When the Government report on whether they are meeting the standard, the focus tends to be on whether more than 50% of people start their treatment within two weeks, which was the standard set at the start. However, the standard was in two parts: to start treatment within two weeks and then to have access to the full evidence-based, NICE-approved treatment package. I will
focus on that element because, depressingly, evidence shows that the system is falling far short of what it should be doing.

I want to focus on a freedom of information survey conducted over this financial year to try to establish the position across the country, looking not just at how long people wait but, critically, at whether they get access to the full evidence-based treatment package. The evidence that emerges from that survey is deeply disturbing. First, only 29% of trusts across the country stated that they were meeting the full NICE-approved, evidence-based treatment package. That is 29% on a standard that the Government say is being met. It is not being met. Even 29% is generous, because within that I think there were two trusts that were delivering the service only up to the age of 35, whereas the standard says that people up to the age of 65 should be included. Across the country, people are simply not getting access to the evidence-based treatment that we know works and delivers such an extraordinary return on investment.

I suppose I would put it this way. Can we imagine a cancer service saying to patients, “We’ll give you half the chemotherapy or radiotherapy treatment,” or, “I’m sorry, but there are no professionals available to deliver this part of your treatment”? There would be an outcry. It would be impossible for the Government to get away with it. The Daily Mail would be apoplectic.

The result would be that the standard would be met, one way or another—but here, day by day across the NHS, this standard for mental health is routinely being missed in a wholly unacceptable way.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his important speech and his comments. Does he agree that there is a particular challenge in mental health, in that, in the wake of the Health and Social Care Act 2012, parity of esteem is enshrined in law, and we should be not just aspiring to, but achieving equality for mental health? This is just another indicator of how far we are from achieving that goal.

Norman Lamb: I totally agree. The 2012 Act is clear that there should in effect be equal treatment between mental health and physical health, but the evidence shows it is not being delivered. I fully understand that it takes time to get there with a new programme, but it is the way it is being implemented that gives me greatest cause for concern. I will focus on how we are falling short of that standard.

In the south region, there is a brilliant programme: it is always important in these debates to recognise that there are sometimes areas of fantastic practice that should be applauded. In the south of England, an amazing woman called Sarah Amani is the programme manager, and there is a full implementing programme. My argument to the Minister is that what is happening in the south should be happening everywhere. The programme produces annual reports, so it is completely open and transparent about the progress it is making and the obstacles that lie in its way.

I should have mentioned that our survey showed that across the country not much more than 50% of the total amount that NHS England says must be invested per patient is being spent per patient on delivering the service. If we are only spending a bit more than 50% of the amount we need to spend, it will fall short. What NHS England in the south is doing is admirable. It highlights that in many areas things have improved over the last year in its region, because it is driving that, but it also says: “There is four-fold variation between the most and least funded EIP teams in the South of England.”

A fourfold variation would never happen with the cancer service. Furthermore:

“None of the providers have investment recommended to provide a NICE concordant package of care”.

In the best region of the country, no provider is meeting what it needs to spend to deliver the full package of care.

On workforce, the report says:

“Recruitment has been in part hindered by lack of extra investment and compounded by a national reduction in the number of qualified staff, particularly nurses”.

On intelligence, it says:

“Although all mental health providers use Electronic Health Record (EHR) systems, the majority (13 out of 16) of providers have yet to automate reporting, resulting in clinicians having to manually troll through whole caseloads for multiple data requests.”

In this day and age, that should not be necessary. There should be a system across the country to enable us to monitor performance against that important standard. When we go through the elements of the NICE-approved treatment package, such as cognitive behavioural therapy for psychosis, across the best region in the country there is enormous variation in the amount of therapy available to people. Some trusts provide what is required, but most fall short.

If we then look at comprehensive physical health checks, there is a target of 90%. We know that people with severe and enduring mental ill health die 15 to 20 years younger than other people, and that part of that can be addressed by having physical health checks. There is a Commissioning for Quality and Innovation standard established for 90% of people with severe and enduring mental ill health to have physical health checks. Across the south of England it is 56%, not 90%. Individual placement and support is a critical element of getting into work, with loads of evidence to support its effectiveness; 30% in the south of England have access to individual placement and support. Going back to what I have said, we must look at the results that flow if we make the investment. It is not only morally wrong but economically stupid to avoid making that investment.

I come now to the evidence on outcomes. The programme can show that where it does the work, hospital admissions are substantially reduced. The evidence is clear for anyone looking at the report to see. The report then looks at employment and education, where it is achieving substantially better rates of employment than generic mental health services, at 40%. Fascinatingly, it even analyses the relationship between investment and outcomes, so it can show that the more we invest in these evidence-based interventions, the better the outcomes. What a surprise: more people get into work, more people get into education and lives are transformed.

The report then talks about securing investment. Bear in mind that I am not quoting a politician but an internal document, led by the Oxford Academic Health Science Network:
“If the Five Year Forward View commitment of £40 million for EIP teams in 2015-16 had been honoured, EIP teams in the South of England would have seen a total growth in budgets of around £15 million. Instead, in 2015-16 the South region EIP teams saw a meagre increase of £3 million.”

That is £3 million instead of £15 million. The report continues:

“Between 2016-18, this trend of lack of investment has continued with a £3.5 million increase in EIP team budgets compared to the £15 million that was expected. Of the 16 providers delivering EIP in the South of England, none have the £8,250 investment per patient recommended to deliver a NICE concordant package of care. The South of England has a poor track record of investment in EIP services”.

That is the best region in the country. It leaves me feeling frustrated that such a prize—such an opportunity—is being squandered through lack of investment and lack of effective implementation.

I then look to the midlands. I have received an email from someone who is working on early intervention in psychosis in the west midlands, which reads as follows:

“There is wide variation in service quality, data reporting, outcomes, resourcing and resource allocation. This has not been made public, presumably because it is politically inexpedient to do so…Many trusts have chosen to disband EIP teams as a cost saving exercise (in Nottingham), or to allow caseloads to rise from 1:15 to 1:30”—

the whole essence of this approach is low case loads, so that people can get the personal attention that they need—

“not provide enough of the NICE mandated therapies, to not appoint psychologists or enough support workers, leading to expensive but ineffective teams…There is currently no governance or accountability in place, which enables the triangulation of proper resources, recommended service levels and outcomes.”

No governance or accountability in place across the midlands. That leaves me totally bewildered. Would this ever have happened when they implemented the cancer standards in the last decade? Of course not. Yet that is what has happened.

“There are systems in place in the north…and in the south…to provide the mechanism by which the accuracy of data, resourcing, services and outcomes can be verified and addressed…The Midlands region of England (west, central, east midlands, and East of England) are the only areas without any established regional development programmes and therefore have no reliable mechanism to prevent the inexorable decline of standards in EIP.”

That is from the frontline and, it seems to me, ought to be taken extremely seriously.

In a presentation given recently in February, in the west midlands, a west midlands clinician said:

“We are really struggling to provide an E1 service that meets the NICE quality standards. Most of the focus of the Trust has been on meeting the two week access standard, which we have done most of the time. We did get some additional money, but it was non-recurring. Caseloads are way above the national average and we are really struggling”.

It then goes through the various elements of the NICE-approved programme.

“Referral rates are very high and we are discharging people sooner than we should.”

That should not be happening in a programme that the Government ought to be really proud of. It is a gem that ought to be nurtured and developed in order to get the very best from it.

When we published the survey that we did earlier this year, the response from NHS England was deeply disappointing. The official was quoted as saying:

“10,000 people each year are now receiving treatment through the early intervention in psychosis programme, with over three-quarters of patients getting treatment within two weeks...The analysis inevitably gives only a partial and dated picture of progress in these services.”

Well, I do not think that public bodies should be making misleading statements like that, because the analysis was full and complete across the whole country. It was not dated in any way. But this quote from NHS England—an anonymous quote—was designed to discredit the analysis. Rather than discrediting the analysis, it seems to me that a public body should be acknowledging the problem and addressing how it will try to solve it. This sort of denial approach is unhelpful. I wrote to the UK Statistics Authority, because I think it is inappropriate for public bodies to respond to analyses in that way.

Before I finish I want to deal with some asks of the Government. This is part of the five-year forward view. The Government have stated that it is a clear priority, so I want the Government to make it a priority. I want the Government to look at the implementation of this programme and to recognise that in some regions, nothing is happening to drive the implementation of these national standards. Personally, I think that it is intolerable that someone with psychosis in Dudley, in the west midlands, gets a raw deal compared with someone in the south of England, but that is what is happening now, because NHS England has no implementation programme in the west midlands, or across the entire midlands, including my own region—the East of England.

First, it needs sufficient investment. Given that there is a return on investment of £15 for every £1 spent, my plea to the Government is to make the investment because they will see a return on it, and benefit from improved employment rates and everything else. Secondly, address the staff shortages that are clearly—at our survey—holding back services all over the place. It really means that Health Education England needs to create a credible plan to address the workforce shortages in early intervention in psychosis services, so that no area falls short because it cannot recruit the right people to deliver the service. Again I ask, would it happen in cancer? Of course not.

Thirdly, end the outrageous age discrimination. A quarter of the trusts that responded to our survey still have a limit of 35 on the service that is delivered, which means that anyone over the age of 35 is not getting access to the evidence-based treatment programme. Fourthly, get back on track with the two-week standard. We are also seeing that even though the standard is being met, the performance is deteriorating. The figures for early this year are worse than the whole of last year, suggesting increasing pressure on services around the country. That is important for the Government to address as well.

Fifthly, the standard applies not only to people who experience a first episode of psychosis, but to people who are at risk of psychosis; but many services simply say, “We don’t deliver a service to those people.” Of course, that is the best early intervention. If we can intervene before the psychosis has occurred, everyone benefits massively, particularly the individual concerned. In many areas, though, there is simply no service, despite the standard being very clear about what is required.
Sixthly, the Government need, as I have said, to fund implementation programmes for every region, modelled on the plan and programme in the south of England, so that everywhere gets access to the same level of service.

Finally, our vision of comprehensive maximum waiting time standards in mental health by 2020 was published not just by Lib Dems, but by Conservatives. It was the Government’s vision. The point of it was to end such discrimination in a publicly funded service. It is not justifiable to have rights of access to treatment for physical health services, but not for mental health services. Why should people be left waiting, sometimes for months on end, for access to treatment? Treatment should be based on evidence and clinical need. But that vision, it seems to me, although included in the “Five Year Forward View”, is not being funded. There is no resource available to implement it. So my plea to the Government is: return to that vision. It was a good vision in 2014.

I will end by making this point: nothing that the Government could do would have a bigger impact on the wellbeing of our communities than to end the under-investment in mental health services. The best example, where the evidence is at its strongest, where you can reduce the flow of people into long-term support from secondary mental health services, is early intervention in psychosis services. There is an enormous prize to be had, but it needs investment and attention, which is lacking at the moment.

1.58 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing this debate. It is a subject that we are both passionate about, as are many people in this room. I pay tribute to the commitment that he made to mental health services during his time as a Minister and beyond.

Psychosis can be a terribly destructive condition. When it starts in adolescence, as it does for most people, people can lose out on schooling, relationships with friends and family are strained and the foundation on which the rest of people’s lives will be built is severely tested. Psychosis is not just about the symptoms—the delusions, hallucinations and suspiciousness that people feel. It is a social condition too. It often leads to a withdrawal from society—avoiding friends, avoiding leaving the house, losing schooling and losing work—and that is why it is such a pernicious condition. It can harm somebody’s life chances. It is a condition that leads to lost opportunities.

I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman has drawn parallels between psychosis and cancer. We have not conferred, but I am also going to do so. We see how good cancer services are. It is important to have that comparator and to hold mental health services to the same standards as physical health services. We should think about psychosis in the same way as physical health services think about cancer. As soon as somebody shows signs of psychosis, they should have rapid—two-week—access to expert diagnostics. If the diagnosis is made, it is right that they get a superb package of care to give them the best possible chance of recovery. That care includes psychological therapies, medication, help with their physical health and, of course, rehabilitation.

If somebody receives that rapid package of care and support, there is half a chance that they will get back into education, employment or an apprenticeship. The rest of their life will be radically different. However, if they do not get that care, support and treatment, the figure for that drops to between 7% and 12%. That is what happens to people who do not get that package. If there was a pathway for cancer that improved survival and recovery from 10% to 50%, we would all know about it and fight for it. I am pleased that within this room there is the same passion and commitment to early intervention in psychosis.

The right hon. Gentleman outlined some of the costs to society of untreated and unmanaged psychosis, but I have a few things to add. Some 65% of all admissions to in-patient mental health units are for psychosis. The police spend increasing amounts of time detaining people under section 136, many of whom have psychosis. A lot of homelessness is associated with psychosis, and many prisoners have or had psychosis. As well as costs to society, there are also big costs to the individual. A person with a severe mental health problem such as psychosis will die, on average, 20 years younger than someone who does not. They are not dying of the psychosis; they are dying of physical health problems that are caused by their underlying mental health problems.

It is important that we are having this debate, but it is unfortunate too. In September 2016, the right hon. Gentleman led a similar debate on this very subject, and 18 months on we are learning that many of the things raised in that debate are still not happening. During that debate, the then Minister said:

“…To improve access to NICE-recommended psychological therapies, we have to ensure that there are the staff numbers and the appropriate skills mix to deliver the full range of treatment to those who need it.”—[Official Report, 7 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 163WH.]

Yet the survey conducted for the right hon. Gentleman’s recent report highlighted some worrying trends around resources and staff numbers. Many patients are not receiving the full range of treatments and interventions that should be included in the specialist EIP care package. Many trusts say that they simply do not have the staff and resources to meet demand.

I return to the analogy with cancer. The Government’s ambition is that 50%, rising to 60% by 2020, of people aged 14 to 65 experiencing a first episode of psychosis should have access to a NICE-compliant care package. If we were to replace the word “psychosis” with “cancer”, there would be outrage at that target. Why should it not be 90% or 95%? Why should the ambition not be 100%? If we were talking about cancer, we would already be hiring the radiologists, laboratory scientists, surgeons, nurses and technicians that we need for the pathway. I want to give credit where credit is due. Setting a 50% standard is at least a step towards achieving parity of esteem, but that ambition is clearly not yet a reality.

NHS England’s data show that more than 60% of patients start treatment within two weeks of referral. However, if we look at the data in a different way and ask people who have started treatment how long they waited, the figures paint a very different picture. In January 2018, even though 722 patients had started treatment within two weeks of referral, 1,344 patients were still waiting to start treatment, and more than 700 had been waiting more than two weeks. We are
talking about figures, but those figures represent people—more than 700 people who were waiting in January of this year. Often these are young people who are not going to school because of new mental health problems that could be managed. During that time relationships are breaking down, people are losing their jobs and people’s life chances are being harmed.

There is regional disparity as well. The north of England, where my constituency of Stockton South is, has the lowest proportion of pathways completed within two weeks of referral and the highest number of total referrals still awaiting treatment. It seems that we have not yet put sufficient resources into our mental health services for the psychologists, occupational therapists, mental health nurses and care co-ordinators who are important to implement this pathway. I have to say that the staff who are working in this area are doing amazing work and transforming lives. I would like to thank them for what they do, but this now needs to be taken to another level and delivered to a much greater scale.

The right hon. Gentleman’s research shows that mental health trusts invest, on average, just half the amount that NHS England estimates is needed to provide EIP in line with NICE guidelines. As he stated, only 29% of trusts say that they are able to offer their patients the full NICE package of care. I urge the Minister to acknowledge that service providers still have ground to make up, and to recognise that they need greater support and resources to do so.

I really hope that the Minister responds with a plan to make things better for the people who we all know are still not getting the service that they need. I have no doubt of her personal commitment to improving mental health services, but she must match rhetoric with ensuring that commissioners are actually putting significant amounts of extra money into mental health services on the ground, and that providers are turning that cash into services that meet the needs of these priority patients. If this were cancer instead of psychosis, we would be doing it—let’s make parity of esteem a reality.

2.7 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on proposing this debate to the Backbench Business Committee—a proposal for which I was a signatory—and securing this important and timely discussion.

The right hon. Gentleman and I have shared many platforms in supporting joint campaigns, and we have debated often the state of our mental health services. We have come to expect from him a level of forensic detail, commitment to improvement and genuine compassion for those with severe mental illness, and today he has not disappointed. We may have very small differences in approach or policy, but he and I share a big-picture commitment to world-class mental health services in this country; to genuine, tangible parity of esteem—real equality—between physical and mental health services; and to a transformation in the way that we view mental illness, talk about mental illness and treat those with mental health conditions.

As with many other forms of mental illness, all the experience and evidence point to the fact that the best time to intervene in cases of psychosis is as soon as possible. The work of Professor Patrick McGorry in Australia and proponents of early intervention in the UK clearly shows that early intervention can have a huge impact on the health of the individual patient, with more chance of them living with conditions in a managed way and ultimately more chance of their recovery.

I echo some of the right hon. Gentleman’s points about the benefits of getting back into employment and the importance of accessing individual placement and support. That is a well-evidenced measure that has already made a tangible difference to many people living with mental ill health. I will reflect on the experience in my area, Merseyside, where Mersey Care provides the majority of mental health services, including early intervention in psychosis. It did an audit of all the patients that it looks after in both the community and in-patient services. It is staggering that just 3% of their patients are in any form of employment. If we compare that figure with people in physical health services, the inequality—the massive disparity—when it comes to mental health is a great concern. That strikes at the heart of the issues that we are discussing.

It should not surprise hon. Members that the earlier we treat any condition, the better our chances of improving health condition, the more likely we are to get a positive result. In terms of system reform in the health service, early intervention clearly fits into the mantra of prevention being better than cure. I have said it before, but I will say it again: if people are not convinced of how important this is by the moral and social reasons, the financial and economic consequences of not contending with mental health sooner should be enough.

For the NHS to be sustainable in the long term, when it will increasingly have to contend with lifestyle-related diseases, we need a seismic shift from treating diseases and conditions when they present in crisis in their most acute forms to a system that allows us to detect them in their earliest stages, to manage them with early interventions and to do everything to avoid certain conditions in the first place, although that is not always possible. That is as true of mental illness as it is of cancer, cardiovascular disease and coronary heart disease.

The issue is not just health outcomes, but the impact that psychosis has on the totality of an individual’s life and their opportunity to be involved in education, employment and training, to maintain relationships with family and friends, to own a home or maintain a tenancy, to be able to go to work and to not be in our criminal justice system. Those outcomes have far-reaching and long-term consequences that are not contained solely within the Department of Health and Social Care, although a Health Minister will respond to today’s debate.

With that in mind, in February 2016, the Labour Front Bench, including me as the then shadow Minister for Mental Health, welcomed the inclusion of the access and waiting time standard for early intervention in psychosis in “The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health”. The commitment was that NHS England should ensure that by April 2016, 50% of people experiencing a first episode of psychosis had access to a NICE-approved care package within two weeks of referral, rising to at least 60% by 2020-21. It is important to reiterate that laudable target and ambition. It was modest, but it was an important first step and it was welcomed across the House, so it is with heavy hearts that we review progress since then, and
I will turn to an area that is of particular interest to me. In the year since the birth of my child, I have been even more aware of the need to support the mental health of new mums. Around 85% of new mothers experience some change in their mood, and for around 10% to 15% of them, that might mean more serious symptoms of anxiety and depression. More than 1,400 women experience post-partum psychosis each year in the UK, which is between 1 and 2 in every 1,000 mothers. I was struck that a woman is between 30% and 40% more likely to experience a period of psychosis in the year after childbirth—more than at any other point in her life.

Post-partum psychosis can take many forms, including hallucinations, depression, delusions and mania. It can be extremely distressing for mothers, their partners, their wider families, and of course, the child. I have had the opportunity to visit two mother and baby units across the country to hear from mums first hand. The condition does not discriminate. It can affect women of any background, colour and income, and it can have serious and far-reaching consequences.

The National Childbirth Trust, the Maternal Mental Health Alliance and others have specifically highlighted the paucity of provision of mental health services for new mothers and the effectiveness of the six-week check in identifying the early stages of mental ill health, including psychosis. In the mix of the debate, I hope the Minister will be able to comment on that.

Dr Paul Williams: I, too, have read the National Childbirth Trust’s report, “The Hidden Half”. It says that despite it being a vulnerable time for women, more than half of women who experience post-natal mental health problems say that they were not asked about them by any health professional. Will my hon. Friend join me in calling for that to be added to the GP contract so that GPs routinely provide a six-week check for the mother, as part of the six-week check for the baby?

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for raising that important report and the campaign, which I have considered as well. The National Childbirth Trust makes an important point about the connection that GPs have with new mums and their babies. I recall that my GP did not ask me about my mental wellbeing and how I felt, but that is not the case for every mum. It is something that we should consider, along with ensuring that every contact counts when it comes to new mums and their babies—be that with the health visitor, a midwife who might come to the home or someone in the hospital. We need to look at the whole spectrum of engagement to ensure that we consider the mental health of mum and baby every step of the way.

I mentioned mother and baby units, which are incredibly important. For anyone who does not know, they are an opportunity to ensure that if the mum is experiencing a period of psychosis or another serious mental illness, they are still able to be with their child. The units offer extremely specialised care and incredible attention from clinicians, who do a remarkable job of ensuring attachment so that mums are not disconnected from their babies, even if they have to be moved across the country.

Mother and baby units are very important for recovery rates. I have asked several parliamentary questions about them, but I want to ask more in the context of this
debate because of their importance to mums who experience post-partum psychosis. In January, I asked the Secretary of State, in a written question, “how many mother and baby beds commissioned by NHS England Specialised Services in 2016/17 are (a) available and (b) in use.” I asked that because although we know that beds have been commissioned, it is not clear whether they are available or in use. The figures that I received in response to a previous question showed a decrease of one in the number of beds available across the country since 2010. I ask the Minister the same question again, publicly, because her response in January was: “The information requested is not available.”

I do not think that it is a difficult question to answer. In the context of this debate, it is a very important one, so I hope the Minister’s officials will provide her with an answer today. Post-partum psychosis, no less than any other kind, requires early identification and early intervention, but we are not doing enough to treat or support post-partum psychosis alongside other forms.

Let me conclude with some brief questions that I hope the Minister will address. First, what steps is her Department taking to address mental health inequalities and the waiting times postcode lottery, particularly in cases of early episodes of psychosis?

Secondly, how can the Minister guarantee that money allocated for mental health services is actually reaching the frontline in all the areas in which it is needed? There are many examples of mental health budgets being raided to pay for other parts of the NHS.

Thirdly, does the Minister agree with the Royal College of Psychiatrists that we need to improve the financial data available for early intervention in psychosis services? Without it, we cannot be sure that services are properly investing in EIP.

Fourthly, does the Minister believe that frontline mental health services have adequate numbers of staff—including psychiatrists, mental health nurses and therapists—to meet the targets set out in the five year forward view? I echo the praise of other hon. Members for our frontline clinicians, who do an incredible job under very challenging circumstances but are severely stretched, as we hear time and again. They cannot meet the workforce challenge alone.

Lastly, what steps will the Minister take to drastically improve early intervention in cases of post-partum psychosis, especially at the six-week check for new mothers, so that we can support women in the first weeks after the birth of their baby?

I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk again on securing the debate. Let us hope that our deliberations this afternoon will lead to concrete improvements and swift action from the Government to prevent unnecessary psychosis, intervene early to prevent unnecessary suffering, and help as many people as possible across the country towards a meaningful path to recovery.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): I will call the first Front-Bench speaker at 2.30 pm.

2.23 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I have been trying to think about how to put the experience of psychosis into words. Having observed it rather than experienced it personally, I suspect that I will not do it justice. From my observation, however, it is a devastating thing to experience: it is debilitating, frightening, bewildering and enormously destructive to someone’s life, aims and prospects. Its impact on people’s lives is severe, as other hon. Members have described.

In the past, a diagnosis of psychosis was essentially a life sentence, but now early intervention and treatment can lead to recovery. People can get their lives back on track—we are not in the dark old days when if someone had a mental illness, that was it. People can and should recover, but getting early treatment is crucial.

I will be brief, not only because you said that the winding-up speeches would begin at half-past 2, Mrs Moon, but because the issue has been covered comprehensively by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who has such huge knowledge and has clearly done an enormous amount of groundwork; by the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams), who brings to the debate his expertise as a doctor; and by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), who does a huge amount of work in the area. I will therefore make only three points.

First, I express my appreciation to the Government, and to the Minister, for their enormous commitment to mental health and their huge focus on improving mental healthcare, achieving parity of esteem and ensuring that far more people have access to treatment, starting from a really low base. They set out that commitment in the “Five Year Forward View”, the most comprehensive strategy for mental health, and have demonstrated it with an increase in mental healthcare funding and with greater transparency. The fact that we can even have this debate, and that there are targets for waiting times and access to mental health, represents great progress from the time described by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk, when targets and transparency were making a huge difference to the quality of physical healthcare but there was no information about the quality of mental healthcare or access to it. We now have a developing, albeit early, set of data about access to mental healthcare. There is a long way to go, and that includes getting much more data about progress through treatment and outcomes, but the access data has at least given us a start. I welcome the fact that we are in a better place with mental healthcare, and that there is a great commitment to improvement.

My second point, however, is about the worrying trend in the treatment of people with psychosis. The direction of travel seems to be towards a decline in early access to treatment—not just in percentage terms, which could be explained by rising demand, but as an absolute number. The data cited by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk shows the gap between the treatment that some patients receive and the full recommended amount. A large number receive only some treatment, so we cannot hope for the recovery and outcomes that the full NICE-recommended package would offer.

My third point is that we need to know the reason for this worrying trend, which goes against our ambition to treat more people and help them to recover, and against the Government’s commitment to mental health. What is going on? Why do we appear to be going in the wrong direction? We have heard some possible reasons this afternoon, including lack of governance and accountability; lack of focus in many parts of the country, although there is clearly huge variation; underfunding of treatment...
[Helen Whately]

packages, despite the overall backdrop of more money going into mental health; and shortage of workforce. Under the “Five Year Forward View”, there were meant to be 60 extra psychiatrists to provide early intervention in psychosis, but it is not clear—perhaps the Minister will tell us—whether those posts have been filled. It is clear to all hon. Members who work on mental health issues that the workforce is facing a huge challenge in recruitment and retention.

Is there a lack of ambition to provide early access to treatment for psychosis? Even achieving the 2020-21 target of 60% would leave 40% of people without much-needed treatment; we could argue that that is too low an ambition, especially as we know how effective treatment can be. I welcome the Government’s commitment, but it is worrying that the direction of travel seems not to be positive, so it would be extremely helpful if the Minister gave us some insight into what is going on and what steps are being taken to ensure that people get treatment that works.

2.29 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you for calling me, Mrs Moon. I should perhaps have said earlier that I would take only a short amount of time in my winding-up speech, particularly as we are discussing a devolved issue. I hope that the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) did not have to cut what was a very good speech short. I should perhaps have indicated to you, Mrs Moon, that I only intended to take a short amount of time, to enable everyone to get the full coverage.

It is a pleasure to speak with you in the chair, Mrs Moon, on this very important subject. I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing the debate and pay tribute to his awareness-raising and campaigning work on this important issue over a great number of years, as has been mentioned. I also commend him for his detailed and comprehensive speech and, as I have indicated, for bringing people together today in search of consensual debate, especially when we consider that the topic is health, which normally divides political opinion. On this occasion it has rather united political opinion, so I commend him for that.

The right hon. Gentleman’s powerful speech was supported by others. The hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) spoke of the stark reality that sadly faces people who do not get access to early intervention following diagnosis with psychosis. He spoke with experience and knowledge of this issue, and added greatly to the debate. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) has also worked tirelessly for a number of years on this issue. The statistic she cited—that just 3% of those with psychosis in her area are in employment—is quite frankly staggering. She also spoke of the prevalence of mental health vulnerability for women after childbirth. For me, those two issues alone, among all the others, highlight the importance of getting this right across all areas and why we all need to do more in all areas of this country, and all Governments should do that.

Luciana Berger: Forgive me, but in my remarks I was due to pass on a contribution by the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), who wanted it made known on the parliamentary record that there is no mother and baby unit in Northern Ireland. Although the issue is not devolved, he wanted that point about the availability of support for new mums to be made in the context of this debate.

Neil Gray: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention; it is clearly important that that is put on the record.

Also, as I have already indicated, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent made a very honest speech. Her observations from her clinical experience highlighted how destructive psychosis is, so I pay tribute to her for her contribution. I hope that the Minister will respond not only to hers, but to all the points raised by right hon. and hon. Members.

This issue is important, because when the Prime Minister entered Downing Street on 13 July 2016, she listed a number of “burning injustices” that she hoped to address, in order to make Britain “a country that works for everyone”, among which was the injustice that

“If you suffer from mental health problems, there’s not enough help to hand.”

Clearly, such rhetoric is to be welcomed, as is the Prime Minister’s promise that parity of esteem would be introduced in dealing with mental health services in the NHS in England. However, as demonstrated in I think all the speeches today, we have not really got to the point of matching that rhetoric with actions and outcomes. I think there was a universal acknowledgement in today’s speeches that not enough is being done.

Today’s debate focuses specifically on psychosis and the waiting-time standards for early intervention in this area. As we are all too aware, mental health in general often comes with many stigmas and misconceptions attached, and that is nowhere more apparent than in relation to the subject of today’s debate. In psychosis, people experience symptoms of paranoia, and often delusional belief systems that take them outwith reality— that was covered so well by the hon. Member for Stockton South. It affects sufferers socially and in terms of their work, education and overall health. Although only a small proportion of the population are impacted by psychosis, particularly compared with other mental health issues, its impact on the individual and those around them can be devastating, and sufferers require long-term support and help to recover.

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who is herself a clinical psychologist, pointed out in a similar Westminster Hall debate in September 2016, behavioural family therapy is also extremely important. Psychosis affects not just the person who suffers, but their whole family and social circle. People can suddenly find themselves in a caring role, and research indicates that spending 10 hours or more a week as a carer can be a challenge to someone’s wellbeing.

As the subject of today’s debate and the contributions of many Members have made clear, early intervention is key to ensuring that the support and recovery process can be as successful as possible, for both the individual and those around them. In Scotland, the Scottish National Party Government have made mental health one of their main priorities, and they will continue to place a high importance on mental health services. A key part of that prioritisation in relation to psychosis has been
focusing on prevention and early intervention, particularly for infants, children and young people—it has already been said why that is important—who are the groups most likely to be impacted by the first episodes of psychosis.

An analysis undertaken by the King’s Fund recommended that

“Providing high-quality care to patients requires two things: first, that NHS trusts have the revenue to recruit and retain the correct mix of staff, and second that these staff exist and want to work for the NHS. Our analysis highlights that there are underlying issues with the supply and availability of key staffing groups in mental health. Investing in the skills, job satisfaction and wellbeing of our current workforce should be a priority, but we must also invest to ensure sufficient workforce capacity.

In Scotland, the Government have attempted to address those important staffing and funding issues by increasing NHS mental health spending from £651 million in 2006-07 to £937 million in 2016-17, which has enabled the aim of placing an additional 800 mental health workers in key settings by 2022 to remain on course.

However, I am not trying to argue that there is no room for improvement in Scotland—clearly there is—and that everything is as good as it can be. Clearly, there is more that we could and should do. The Scottish Government are aware that there is room for improvement and their “Mental Health Strategy 2017-2027” has identified a number of areas where further improvements can be made. In particular, the strategy acknowledges that

“Working to improve mental health care is not just the preserve of the NHS or the health portfolio.”

Instead, improving mental health care requires improving a wide range of public services, such as education and justice, as well as addressing other important societal problems, such as poverty and employment, all of which have a relationship with mental health and a role to play in improving health outcomes.

Again, I commend the right hon. Member for North Norfolk, and I hope that the Minister, when she replies, will reflect on all the comments from the right hon. Gentleman and from others, and respond to the examples given from the frontline and to the asks that he and others from different parties have made today.

2.37 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): As has already been said, and I will echo it, it is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you in the Chair, Mrs Moon.

I also join others in congratulating the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing this important debate, and on the way that he has opened it. In addition, I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Stockton South (Dr Williams) and for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), as well as the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), and the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), the Scottish National party spokesman, for their contributions.

Experience of psychosis can be frightening for those affected by it, and for their families. The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent talked about how debilitating and frightening that experience of psychosis can be.

A story that came to my attention was from a woman called Louise, who wrote a blog for Mind, the mental health charity. In that blog, she described her experience of psychosis. She said:

“While everyone was celebrating the Olympics, I was sectioned and spent a week in hospital. I had started to hear voices and was living in a very strange world. Being in hospital was a terrifying experience and I couldn’t understand why I was there or what had happened to me. I thought the nurses were trying to kill me and I refused medication. Eventually, I accepted the drugs and I did recover. I was released after a week and received treatment in the community.”

The interesting thing about that story and blog is that Louise goes on to say:

“Even a year on, I still find it hard to accept that this happened to me: an independent, strong career woman.”

I wanted to touch on this story because it demonstrates how psychosis affected somebody who was “an independent, strong career woman”.

The story shows, even in those few words, how debilitating and frightening a first experience of psychosis can be.

Given that, and we have heard about it extensively in this debate, it is clear that early intervention and access to treatment for psychosis is a really vital issue: a moral issue, an emotional issue, a financial issue, and an issue of investment. It is about helping people when they are at their most vulnerable and supporting them to recover.

From this debate alone, the evidence is clear that early intervention can significantly improve a patient’s mental health recovery. That has been highlighted by all the contributions we have heard today. One of the most important benefits of early intervention—this has not yet been mentioned—is the finding in studies that it can reduce the risk of a young person who is experiencing psychosis attempting suicide. That is clearly an important thing. As we have heard, the care packages approved by NICE can also have an impact beyond the mental health recovery of a patient, impacting on their physical health and their chances of remaining in employment. Each part is vital. A key statistic comes from the mental health charity Rethink. It found that 35% of young people in early intervention in psychosis care are in employment, as compared with just 12% of young people in standard mental health care. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk discussed that.

The access and waiting time standard for early intervention in psychosis is not being met, partly because the official figures are for patients who have started treatment. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South discussed, YoungMinds has stated that in January 2018, even though 722 patients had started treatment within two weeks of referral, 1,344 patients were still waiting to start treatment, and 727 of them had been waiting more than two weeks since referral. We are getting a partial picture from NHS England. We were all sent a briefing this morning that said that the access standards are being met, but they clearly are not if they are not taking account of patients who are waiting. The figures for January 2018 also showed that 401 patients had been waiting more than six weeks and still not started treatment, and 217 patients had been waiting for more than 12 weeks without starting treatment. As is familiar when we are looking at issues around mental health, it is the people waiting for long periods who we have to reflect on.

We have also heard about the regional variations. This has been an important debate for highlighting them. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk reported in detail on performance in the south region, which is the best-performing region. YoungMinds reported that the north of England is the worst-performing region. It has the lowest proportion of pathways completed within two weeks of referral.
[Barbara Keeley]

It is clear that the Government have not invested in the staffing and resources needed to deliver the full package of NICE-evidenced support and treatments. It is clear that many local areas are facing challenges in implementing the early intervention in psychosis access and waiting time standard because of those substantial variations. What is the Minister’s assessment of how those challenges can be overcome? That is one of the most important questions from today.

We have had a briefing this morning from NHS England on the NICE-recommended interventions and the scoring matrix to be used, including on carer support. The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts mentioned carers, but I will discuss the subject a bit more fully. Psychosis can cause considerable distress not only for the person experiencing it, but for their family members who are carers. Why are the targets for carer support so low within that NICE evidence package? The figures that NHS England sent to us this morning show 38% of carer support taken up against targets of 25%, 50% and 75% for 2017-18. Take-up of support by fewer than four out of 10 carers is a poor achievement, given the impact that psychosis can have on unpaid carers.

I do not want to miss the opportunity to question the Government about the shameful way they have been treating carers in recent months. I have raised this before with the Minister, but the Government have abandoned their promised carers strategy after 6,500 carers gave up their time to contribute to the consultation. I know it is not her responsibility any more, but it was at the time, and she gave this reply to me in December. She said that,

“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.”—[Official Report, 7 December 2017; Vol. 632, c. 1239.]

It is now the middle of March, and we have no carers strategy and no carers action plan. Will the Minister raise the matter with her colleague the Minister for Care, the hon. Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage)? I suggest that the Government stop treating carers in this shabby way. In terms of this debate, will the Minister look at the low targets for carer support in the targets for early intervention in psychosis? Will she set a more ambitious target to provide higher levels of support to carers of people experiencing psychosis?

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree rightly raised the issue of perinatal mental ill health. As we have just had International Women’s Day, I wanted to refer to the 2003 women’s mental health strategy. It was a comprehensive strategy for women’s mental health issues from the previous Labour Government. I was glancing at the document on my iPad, and section 8.8 is about women with perinatal mental ill health. What has happened to the previous Labour Government’s comprehensive women’s mental health strategy? Does the Minister agree that perinatal mental ill health and other aspects of women’s mental ill health merit a gender-specific approach? Will the Government start to think about implementing that?

I want to briefly touch on one further area of concern—the lack of good-quality data. All of us involved in these debates on mental health have to spend a large amount of time asking parliamentary questions that do not get answers because the data are not there. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk is to be commended for his freedom of information survey. In 2016, Public Health England produced a report into data around psychosis and found what the Centre for Mental Health has described as “massive inequalities” in care, which is just what we have been hearing about in this debate. The report found that the proportion of people who have experienced psychosis who have a comprehensive care plan ranges from around 4% in some local areas to 94% in others. The evidence was there in 2016 that massive variations existed.

As the Centre for Mental Health put it:

“The report is as remarkable, however, for the data it cannot present as for what it can. There is very little information about the lives of people with psychosis and how far the services available help them to recover”.

The report was unable to give any information about the prescribing of anti-psychosis medication. Shockingly, it found that there were no known recent robust estimates of local numbers of people with psychosis. How can we deal with recruitment and staffing issues and the resources plan that Members have talked about if that is the state of the data?

I appreciate that there have been some improvements in mental health data in recent years, but it has been very slow progress and there are still many gaps. The Government talk about parity of esteem between mental and physical health, but it is hard to imagine a situation where we did not know the number of people in a local area being diagnosed with different cancers. That situation just would not arise. When I meet campaigners who work on mental health issues, the lack of readily available data is a constant and major concern.

The former Under-Secretary of State for Health, Nicola Blackwood, liked to talk about accountability through transparency. She said:

“One of the ways in which we are ensuring that money reaches the frontline is through driving accountability through transparency. Mental health services have lagged behind the rest of the NHS in terms of data and our being able to track performance. That is why the NHS will shortly publish the mental health dashboard, which will show not only performance but planned and actual spend on mental health.”—[Official Report, 27 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 513.]

We still have that severe problem. Despite the publication of the mental health dashboard, we have a far less clear picture for mental health data than we do for physical health. We will never be able to plan, resource or move through these issues unless we do. What is the Minister doing, and planning to do, to make better data available across mental health services, particularly for psychosis?

I briefly return to Louise’s story. She was lucky. She said in her blog that she received good-quality treatment. Despite going through some difficult times, when she wrote the blog she was positive about her future, her relationships and her career. She was looking forward to starting a family. If we want to live in a society that has more positive stories like Louise’s, we have to begin to take a much more preventive approach to mental health. Getting the right support can lead to brighter days.

2.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): It is fitting that you are in the Chair for this debate, Mrs Moon, given your interest in these matters. I am grateful to the right hon. Member...
for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for securing this debate. It is always with some mixed feelings that I face him across the Chamber, not least for the reasons that the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) pointed out. However, this has been an extremely well-informed debate on both sides. I have not disagreed with very much of what has been said. It is great to respond to such a passionate debate, among people who genuinely care about the issue.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that improving access and waiting times for early intervention in psychosis must be a top priority. I will set out some of the things that we are doing, which I hope will reassure him of the direction of travel. He is rightly holding us to account on where we are. I quite agree that it is not good enough, and assure all Members who have participated in today’s debate that I am not complacent in any way about any of this.

First, I want to set the context. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree often challenges me that we have not achieved parity of esteem. I do not pretend that we yet have, but we have embarked on a genuinely transformational programme to raise the treatment of mental health issues to parity with physical health. However, that is essentially a cultural change, which will take time.

I want to set out that we do have a plan, to reassure the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams). We have now got to the stage in that plan where we have to be a lot more outcome focused, and really get to the nitty-gritty of what is happening on the ground. As the right hon. Gentleman for North Norfolk set out, there is widespread grit of what is happening on the ground. As the right hon. Gentleman’s pivotal role in introducing those packages of care to their patients. To reassure him, the moment at which he made his request was at the start of the programme.

Norman Lamb: It was this year.

Jackie Doyle-Price: It was measuring the kick-start of the programme. I would hope that if the right hon. Gentleman repeated that in a year’s time, he would get a very different picture. I assure him that we are making progress, but I invite him to continue his scrutiny, because sunlight is the best disinfectant, as I often say.

The hon. Member for Stockton South asked whether we had a plan. We do. The issue is that our plan is often based on inputs and structures. It is only when we get the kind of analysis that the right hon. Member for North Norfolk applies that we can see whether an input is really delivering the outcome that we want. Using our tools of leadership, we are now ensuring that we are holding everyone’s feet to the fire to deliver those standards, and that we are actually implementing the plan that we have in place.

To give some detail on what that plan is, we are investing an initial recurrent £40 million per annum for EIP in clinical commissioning group baselines. That will rise to £70 million recurrently by 2021. I have heard the message loud and clear from all hon. Members that they want to be reassured that that money is reaching the frontline. We will go away and think about how we can best illuminate that. We are funding clinical networks in all regions to provide clinical leadership for implementation, and to support local efforts across the country. Those networks provide a great deal of support on sharing best practice, training and innovation. Quite often, sharing best practice can be the best way of driving improvement.

We are investing in a national team to co-ordinate regional teams and to support the monitoring of delivery through the regions. We are developing the data set to illustrate how much progress we are making and how the interventions are being delivered to people. That will allow commissioners and providers to prioritise how they develop and improve their services in line with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance. What is especially welcome is that there is now a recognition of the link between mental and physical health in NHS England’s work, although we have to continue to build on that.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree rightly raised the issue of support for new mums. I am glad to hear that she has visited mother and baby units, as I have. Seeing the reality of that treatment shows how important that service is. We continue to prioritise investment in tackling post-partum psychosis. We are investing £365 million into those services, and are currently looking at issuing contracts for four new mother and baby units. She asked me some specific questions about the number of beds. I will write to her on that, because although it might seem like a simple question, it is slightly more complex. As she has rightly highlighted, it is a very vulnerable time for new mothers. We must ensure that we have services available across the country, as we still have some geographical discrepancies in the level of provision. I highlight the fact that we are putting concrete support for new mums in the community, based around the whole ethos of early intervention. I think that is extremely important.
I could say an awful lot more, but I promise hon. Members that all those who spoke in today’s debate have given me many things to think about, and I will reflect on them. I look forward to debating all these measures regularly. It remains the Government’s priority to deliver a step change in how we provide services for poor mental health. That is a cultural change, and it will take time. That is why we have it as a five-year forward view. We will make the investment in additional staffing resources to deliver that step change, but I have no doubt that all hon. Members in this room will continue to hold my feet to the fire to make sure that we deliver.

2.57 pm

Norman Lamb: I thank the Minister for that response. I ask her to write to all hon. Members who have taken part in today’s debate, responding to each of the issues that have been raised, so that we get clear answers on them all. I would highlight two points. First, regional implementation plans are critical in making things happen. Secondly, a point was made earlier about the sustainability and transformation partnerships. If a significant proportion of them simply do not include a commitment to meeting the standard by 2020, that is basically a recipe for disaster. That has to be addressed.

I thank the other two Front-Bench spokespeople for their really excellent contributions. The point that was made about suicide was absolutely right: we can reduce the suicide rate through this programme in particular. I also thank the three Back-Bench contributions, which were all really excellent and well informed, and covered such important ground. In the Minister’s response, I would like her to deal particularly with the YoungMinds point about the calculation of how long people are waiting. I would like her to address the issue about only a quarter of STPs making that commitment by 2020, and the issue of post-partum psychosis that was correctly raised by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger).

Finally, I join others in expressing my appreciation for some incredibly inspiring staff who work in these services, and who demonstrate how lives can be transformed through doing the right thing with the necessary investment. The plea to the Minister is to make sure that the investment and implementation are there to take advantage of this opportunity.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered access and waiting time standards for early intervention in psychosis.
Perhaps I should state that, from a philosophical or ideological point of view, I am not an anti-private sector. I am not anti-City. I recognise that globalisation is a potential force for good, even though it does throw up some considerable challenges and needs to be managed. I feel, however, that the role of Government must be to ensure that where vital national interests are at stake, the private sector is regulated in such a way that those interests prevail over what are often the short-term or illusory interests of the shareholders involved or the myriad City professionals and advisers that tend to make a lot of money from takeover bids. Some of the issues that arise from this proposed takeover bid are specific to GKN and Melrose, but others throw up broader, national issues.

GKN is a company of enormous strategic importance to the British economy. In 2015, it made sales of more than £16 billion worldwide and contributed £1.36 billion to our economy. It is one of the major—perhaps the major—tier 1 providers within the automotive and aerospace industries.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend has brought a timely debate. I have worked in defence industries. The Secretary of State has got to look at this in the context of the national interest, because the real danger is that the Americans will hive it off piece by piece. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) is right when he says that Melrose only keeps businesses for about five years, makes a profit for shareholders and is gone. This is probably one of the last bastions of Britain’s independent defence industries. More importantly, there are 6,000 jobs at stake. No doubt Melrose has its eye on the pension scheme as well—most of them do.

Mr Bailey: My hon. Friend anticipates some of the points in my speech. I agree with him completely.

GKN holds the position as one of the world’s greatest tier 1 providers in part because of the number of portfolios it holds worldwide with other joint venture companies, as well as with British companies, but also because of its research, development and technological advances, particularly in the automotive and aerospace industries. The UK aerospace sector is the largest in Europe, second globally to the USA. It supports more jobs in the UK than £16 billion worldwide and contributed £1.36 billion to our economy. In 2015, it made sales of more than £16 billion worldwide and contributed £1.36 billion to our economy. It is one of the major—perhaps the major—tier 1 providers within the automotive and aerospace industries.

GKN not only invests in research and development in its own companies, but partners universities up and down the country—Leeds, Manchester, Warwick, Nottingham and Sheffield, for instance—again helping to underpin regional economies, driving research excellence and giving students the level of skills that they need and an involvement in manufacturing that is absolutely crucial for developing our future skills base. As the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) mentioned, the Melrose business model appears to be fundamentally incompatible with that approach.

I was chided by the Melrose chief executive for calling Melrose a hedge fund company. It says it is not; it says it is a turnaround company. In the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee it was called an asset-stripping company. Whatever we call it, it has a short-term strategy reminiscent of the way in which hedge funds work. It aims to buy and sell companies within a window of between three and five years. Despite protests that it does keep companies for the longer term, one example that must be considered is that of Brush of Loughborough, a UK company that makes gas turbines. It was taken over by Melrose 10 years ago and is failing. Melrose has been unable to sell it on in its desired turnaround window because of the huge structural change in the sector owing to the move away from fossil fuels. Melrose has failed to invest in development to mitigate the changes and save employment within the company. It has already halved its workforce and has recently announced another 270 job cuts.

Although Melrose has invested £230 million in research and development in various companies over the past five years, the significant thing is that that is less than it paid its top 20 executives in the past year alone.
not detect a more telling intervention and substantiation of the point being made. We must remember that Airbus is only one customer of GKN, but Airbus’s public statement sends a signal to many other strategic customers of GKN.

Another cause for concern is the relative size of the companies. Last year alone GKN had revenue in excess of £10 billion, compared with just over £1 billion at Melrose, which proposes to finance its bid by borrowing £3.5 billion.

In addition, GKN employs 60,000 people across 30 countries, a level of personnel management that Melrose has no comparable experience of. As part of its takeover bid, Melrose has revealed plans to sack the entire board of GKN. Melrose as a company would double in size, but with no commitments to further capacity and an absence of the management expertise that has historically been part of GKN. Furthermore, Melrose has never taken over a company that specialises in aerospace manufacturing, which is perhaps one of the most concerning issues of all.

GKN’s prominence in the aerospace sector means it has a unique stake in the maintenance of our national security. As a leading world tier 1 supplier, it operates on a lot of UK defence platforms. As its order book with the Ministry of Defence is relatively small, Melrose has claimed that that issue is not significant. It ignores the fact that many of GKN’s customers are foreign companies that provide defence equipment that is subsequently procured by this country, so there is a much greater strategic involvement than the figures quoted by Melrose suggest.

GKN’s military aerospace involvement includes Lockheed Martin, Lightning, Raptor, Boeing, Eagle, Hornet, Harrier II, Eurofighter, Typhoon, Panavia, Tornado, Saab, Gripen and the new B-21 engine—a huge range of engines and vital components in a vast range of our defence components and needs for the future. Significantly, our own Defence Secretary felt the need to raise this issue with the Department as he no doubt responds to concerns that lie within the industry. I hope the Minister will refer to that when he sums up.

The US Government are highly likely to review any takeover via their Committee on Foreign Investment. The UK has a clear interest and should do the same. The public interest test applies under the national security element of section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002, and the UK Government have the power to consider whether the takeover is in the public interest.

Mr Cunningham: Earlier, I mentioned the fact that GKN is one of the few companies that now gives Britain its independence in defence terms. It has been known for years—and if we think about it, it is a matter of the national interest—that, for example, Pratt & Whitney has always been after Rolls-Royce. That gives an indication of what is likely to happen at GKN if Melrose takes it over and asset-strips it. American companies will come in, and we will no longer have an independent role to play in manufacturing our own defence equipment.

Mr Bailey: My hon. Friend anticipates, with great foresight, some of the potential developments if the takeover were allowed to happen.

I believe that there are broader issues, however. The GKN takeover is a case that goes well beyond defence. It is relevant to our productivity, as the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) said, to our economy and research capabilities, and to the jobs and pensions of about 6,000 people in the UK. I am not here to argue that GKN is a perfect company and perfectly managed—that issue is widely acknowledged; but in view of the contribution that it makes to our industry as a whole, the highly paid and highly skilled jobs that it provides, its innovative research-led developments in key sectors of the economy and its commitment to maintaining a strong manufacturing industry in the UK, its future development needs to be carefully thought through, balancing the interests of shareholders with the vast number of other stakeholders involved.

Neither the takeover, nor a hastily contrived reorganisation in response to it, is the best way to deal with the problems. A solution centred on preserving shareholder value at the expense of all else would be disastrous for regions, such as the west midlands, that depend on manufacturing, and for productivity and the economy. The far-reaching implications of the proposed bid should prompt the Secretary of State to look at widening his powers of intervention on takeovers to include broader considerations of public interest. I appreciate that it was a Labour Government who withdrew that consideration, in the Enterprise Act 2002, but since then the global nature of the world economy has changed rapidly. Welcome adjustments were made to the takeover code relating to post-offer undertakings following the Kraft-Cadbury takeover. However, it is time to re-examine the situation, and to seek a more robust set of criteria that acknowledge the integrated investment and research-led nature of the 21st-century global economy, to ensure that the globalisation that benefits many areas does not decimate others. That could be done by broadening the criteria for defining the public interest, from the existing four, by increasing the percentage of shareholders who have to vote in favour of a takeover, or in other ways. It is time that the question was re-examined, to get a more robust set of criteria, which would preserve vital national interests.

In answer to a question on 7 February, the Prime Minister said at column 1494 that she would act in the “national interest”; and in August 2016 she launched her Cabinet Committee focusing on delivering one of her Government’s top three priorities—an economy that works for everyone, with a strong industrial strategy at its heart. The case of the GKN takeover provides the Prime Minister with a chance to prove the strength of her commitment to her self-defined mission to make Britain a country that works for all.

Several hon. Members rose—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. Five Back-Bench Members want to speak, and the arithmetic is straightforward. I intend to call the Scottish National party spokesperson at 4 o’clock, so I hope that people will respect that time.

3.24 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I will of course stick to the timing, but if I stray over, please do...
not hesitate to call me to order. It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey). I heartily congratulate him on securing this extremely important debate. I agree with virtually everything he said, and it is a pleasure to have that experience about a speech made from across the Chamber. I see other midlands MPs in their places; we have many common interests in this important matter.

GKN has a 250-year history and has played a significant part in the manufacturing heritage of the midlands for many years, since it was established as an ironworks in 1759. In Redditch we are proud to host the global headquarters of that multinational business. As the local MP, I have engaged with it through visits and through discussions of how it will continue to work proactively in the local community, of which it is a great supporter. That is a responsible approach and GKN is leading by example.

Unfortunately, when GKN announced its results in 2017, although the latest annual sales figures were up, its trading margins had started to fall. It was evidently vulnerable and it set out to launch a new strategy to boost the company. Once it became clear to me that GKN was under threat of a hostile takeover, I spoke without delay to the company bosses and was told in no uncertain terms that all 260 employees in Redditch, many of whom are my constituents, would lose their jobs if Melrose were to be successful in its takeover. It is for those 260 people that I speak today. As the hon. Member for West Bromwich West has said, they are among a small number around the world. I welcome the Government’s recent move to strengthen the takeover rules, following the report from the Takeover Panel. It is welcome, and is in line with the Prime Minister’s manifesto commitments. I ask the Minister to update us on the consultations and proposals. My constituents and GKN employees would welcome further clarity.

The hon. Member for West Bromwich West, who spoke so well, covered most of the points that I wanted to make, and I shall confine my remarks to a few key areas. I agree that the takeover appears to be opportunistic, and there is great concern that the offer would undervalue GKN’s business culture, which it fought hard to build up. GKN has invested heavily in research and development expenditure, skills and engineering jobs, all of which are badly needed in the UK, particularly in the midlands. Its work and portfolio have been built up with years of experience, which are not matched in Melrose. We in the midlands are proud of our record—our heritage—of making things.

GKN may have lost its way, up to a point, in recent years. Perhaps it is not performing to the full extent of its capability, but it has a focus on a long-term business model. That is a welcome contrast to the short-termism of Melrose, which is not seen as a sustainable long-term investor in the best interest of the company. Indeed, GKN’s former CEO, Nigel Stein, resisted splitting up the firm because he felt that the expanding aerospace business provided a degree of security against the typically cyclical nature of its auto side. It made sense to grow, given the increasing overlap of aerospace and automotive, and the fact that a bigger business is better able to resist takeovers—witness what happened to Cadbury after it separated from Schweppes.

I have written to the Secretary of State and have met him to put those concerns to him. I fully understand that, as he has explained to me, he is unable to comment directly on the matter, owing to the quasi-judicial nature of his role. I understand that any comments that he made could be construed as affecting the course of the takeover and could undermine and invalidate it. However, I am calling on the Minister who is responding to this debate to provide any further clarity he can. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, led by its excellent Chair, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), is looking at the matter and would, I am sure, welcome clarity. I see that a fellow Committee member, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), is present for the debate. It was interesting today when GKN’s biggest customer announced its view. I believe it is quite rare for not only a customer, but the board of pension trustees and the entire board of directors to reject a bid in that way.

I want to touch on one matter that I believe is in the takeover code, which is that a company that is going to take over a company must provide assurances as to what it will do. Melrose has tried to provide assurances to our Select Committee and in the public arena, and it has sent letters to me—I do not know whether the other members have received them. It has pledged to keep GKN’s headquarters in the UK and maintain the same levels of research and development funding, but we do not know what those pledges are based on and what is behind them. How can we be certain that they will be adhered to and delivered? That is a matter of great concern to GKN and people in Redditch. Since GKN’s sale of its Driveline business to Dana, there has been a lot of turbulence inside the company. A number of issues are affecting GKN employees in Redditch and are causing them to worry.

In Melrose’s defence, it has said that it is a people-focused company with an outstanding track record on pension schemes, and it has indicated that GKN’s current schemes will be safe. It has said that it invests more in R&D than GKN does, and that its actions are in line with the Government’s industrial strategy. It has said all those things—I am putting them on the record to be fair to it—but I want to see more evidence of that because the weight of evidence is not currently in its favour. We must find a balance between a short-term cash injection and a long-term strategic overhaul, and it must be managed by those with knowledge of and expertise in this industry.

I believe, as the hon. Member for West Bromwich West said, that the Government are responsible for supporting the growth and productivity of this sector and for creating the right business environment. That would have so many benefits for our economy in the midlands, for our productivity and for the whole skills piece. We are encouraging young people in our communities to set out a path for themselves in the fantastic science, technology, engineering and maths subjects. We have skills gaps in those sectors in our country, including in the midlands. GKN is a great example of a company that has brought on young people and promoted such careers, but I fear for the future of that.

The evidence in front of me does not convince me that this takeover bid is in the best interests of the company, the country’s long-term industrial strategy and the shareholders. There are important questions to be answered about how we define our national interest and defence.
Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) for securing this important debate. I echo the serious concerns that he and the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) raised about the bid for the proposed takeover by Melrose of GKN. GKN employees raised similar concerns when I recently met them at a lobby organised by Unite the union just a couple of weeks ago, and they are echoed in my constituency, where GKN Aerospace employs 220 people and is a world leader in commercial and military flight-deck transparencies. It provides toughened glass for flight-deck windows, and specialist safety glass to more than 50 programmes. There is no better illustration of why this takeover bid has national security implications than GKN Aerospace’s military involvement at Kings Norton.

I do not need to remind the Minister of the importance of the UK’s aerospace industry. That is why we need to take the concerns raised by the industry seriously. ADS, the leading organisation representing the aerospace sector, warned that what happens to GKN is of critical importance to the wider sector. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West rightly mentioned the unprecedented intervention of the chief operating operator of Airbus, who said yesterday:

“It would be practically impossible for us to give any new work to GKN under such an ownership model when we don’t know who will be the long-term investor.”

GKN is also a key strategic player in the automotive sector. Driveline does pioneering work on components for the ultra-low-emission vehicles of the future. I am aware that GKN’s management is proposing to split off that part of the company through the merger of Driveline and the United States firm Dana. On the positive side, there is the prospect that that will create an engineering powerhouse in the automotive sector on a global scale. I very much hope it achieves that prospect, but I do not want to be starry-eyed about it. Ministers should seek assurances from GKN and Dana about the long-term commitment of the new merged company to the UK, including on jobs and our research and development base.

Also, if GKN Aerospace is left as a stand-alone company, I endorse west midlands industry analyst Professor David Bailey’s call—my hon. Friend is right to pay tribute to his work on this issue—for the Government to consider taking a golden share to protect the public interest in the company for the long term.

None of that makes me any warmer about the Melrose alternative. Melrose claims—the hon. Member for Redditch mentioned this—that it will “return GKN to an engineering and manufacturing powerhouse”, but its track record of taking over and selling on companies does not give me confidence that its takeover bid is in the interests of the long-term future of GKN or British industry, whether in the aerospace or automotive sectors. That is why there is such cross-party opposition to the takeover bid in this House. I am pleased that Birmingham City Council’s leader, Councillor Ian Ward, and its cabinet member for jobs and skills, Councillor Brett O’Reilly, have warned about the consequences of the Melrose bid for the industrial base of Birmingham and the wider west midlands. I am pleased that they have been joined by the West Midlands Mayor, who has added his voice on the subject.

Industry analysts have observed that such a takeover bid would not be allowed to go ahead in France or Germany: That is yet another reminder, if we needed one, of why the UK’s takeover laws need urgent reform, including the public interest test, against which takeovers are assessed, and the majorities needed to approve takeovers. Why cannot we require a majority of 75% in this country, as Germany does? We must ensure that institutions whose interests are intrinsically short-term, such as hedge funds, are not able to decide on issues that affect the long-term future of key, strategic companies in our economy.

That is for the future, but GKN’s extensive role in the UK defence industry indicates, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West said, that this takeover bid raises national security issues, which means that the Government already have the grounds and the responsibility to intervene under section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002. No doubt the Minister will say that, because the Secretary of State has a quasi-judicial role on these matters, he is prevented from saying much today, but I put this to him: it is not what Ministers say about this takeover bid that is important; it is what they do. They should intervene and block it.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) on securing this debate. I echo many of the comments that have been made. It is clear that there is a consensus that GKN is at the cutting edge of the UK Government’s industrial strategy and plays a key part in that. We have heard that it is involved in sensitive programmes, and that it provides technology for a US defence company. I say that because the Royal Air Force has ordered 138 of the F-35B fighter jets made by that company. That is worth noting. The lifespan of some of those products could be up to 50 years from initial development, and that requires continuous maintenance. We already know that the London-based company Melrose has a record of buying companies, holding on to them for a few years and then stripping them. Given the nature of the technologies we are talking about, it makes no national sense to allow a hostile takeover to happen.

GKN operates in more than 30 countries and has 58,000 employees, including 6,000 in the UK. Even the workers are expressing concerns that a takeover by Melrose could leave the Government’s industrial strategy in tatters and see GKN sold off piecemeal, bit by bit, with jobs cut or shipped abroad. The warnings could not be clearer. Even the Secretary of State for Defence recently said before the Select Committee that he felt it would have been remiss of him to fail to express concerns. The merger could see parts of the business that provide components for military equipment falling below standards. The Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, a US regulator relevant to military implications, must give approval, but GKN has warned that it does not believe that Melrose will be able to obtain that approval within the required time. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) said, we are talking about a potential and unnecessary risk to national security.
Under the Enterprise Act 2002, a number of authorities have the statutory power to intervene in takeovers. The power can, rightly, be exercised only on certain specified grounds. There are three main grounds on which certain authorities can stop takeovers. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy may intervene on the grounds of national security and of financial stability. We have already established that national security is an issue, or at least an argument, but there is also a clear argument for financial stability.

As if the scale of what is at stake were not argument enough to act, flinging in the political chaos and uncertainty surrounding our political future due to Brexit ensures that the stable continuation of a major employer is more important than ever. We only need to look at the pensions aspect. The chief executive of the Pensions Regulator wrote to the Work and Pensions Committee to express grave concerns about the GKN pension scheme. We are trying to promote pensions and to convince people to ensure that they are secure in later life, because we recognise there is ticking time bomb, which could be disastrous, but at the end of December the GKN pensions deficit officially stood at £700 million. GKN warned that Melrose’s intention to ramp up the debt would lower its ability to support the pension scheme. That seems to be totally counterproductive, given the language continually used about pensions in particular.

Surely, before any progress can be allowed, Melrose must submit its takeover plans to the Pensions Regulator to show that the security of the retirement scheme will remain intact, and that is even without all the other arguments I have given. The reality is that the Government have the power, the reasons and the support to act. The question is, do they have the will?

3.43 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer.

Guest, Keen and Nettlesfold has a ring to it, and GKN is an iconic engineering company, a British success story with a history stretching back over 259 years, founded in south Wales. Three years ago, I remember a man who had worked 44 years for GKN calling it “as British as the royal family”.

Here in Britain, GKN employs 6,000 people across major sites in Filton near Bristol, Birmingham and, in particular, the Isle of Wight. It now employs 58,000 people worldwide, with companies and joint ventures in more than 30 countries. Crucially, GKN undertakes the largest portion of its research and development work in the UK, with the majority of aerospace R&D taking place in Filton and automotive R&D in Abingdon.

I welcome the all-party approach to this issue, and the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) is right to say that we talk with pride about GKN, its workers and what it does—so do I. The Driveline factory is in my constituency—800 excellent men and women who serve the industry and the nation well.

The takeover puts a great British engineering icon into jeopardy, because of not only the history of Melrose but what is happening with some of GKN’s major customers. Reference has already been made to the revelations made only yesterday in the Financial Times about what Airbus has made abundantly clear. In the words of its chief operating officer:

“The nature of our industry is one that requires a commitment to long-term investment and strategic vision... The industry does not lend itself to shorter-term financial investment which naturally reduces R&D budgets and limits vital innovation.”

As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) rightly said, typically we are talking about development lines and R&D strategies that stretch over 20 or 30 years, and the Airbus chief operating officer went on:

“It would be practically impossible for us to give any new work to GKN under such an ownership model when we don’t know who will be the long-term investor.”

He is right and—I can say this with confidence—others will follow in the days to come.

As the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) said earlier, Melrose has a chequered past with regards to the companies it has owned. For example, Melrose and Dynacast from the company’s pensions it moved much production overseas to—in its words—”cheaper countries”. Melrose closed its Alcester site the same year that it took over the company and had no UK presence between 2005 and 2008. In July 2008 it acquired the FK1 group, of which manufacturing firm Brush is part. Melrose began selling off parts of the group in 2009 and sold off about 15 businesses between 2009 and 2014. It implemented severe job cuts at the Brush plant in Loughborough, taking the number of employees down from 1,200 to 600, with a further 270 redundancies announced this year, again moving production overseas and hollowing out a once great company.

One of the workforce’s big concerns, which I share, is pensions. As the hon. Member for Redditch said, like many UK companies GKN has a significant pensions deficit that it is working hard to reduce. By agreement with its workforce and their trade unions, in 2017 the GKN group pension scheme was closed to future accruals. A contribution of £250 million was paid into the scheme. Crucially, on assessment of the company’s pensions covenant, the scheme was found to be the “high end of good”. No concern was expressed about GKN’s ability to deal with the pensions problem.

Significantly, however, Melrose has not given the guarantee it was asked for. On the contrary, its whole approach has been to increase debt significantly. The consequences of that will be to weaken the strength of the covenant and to put at risk the pension scheme. In the aftermath of tragedies such as Carillion and British Steel, the last thing we need at an iconic British engineering company is such a problem befalling the workers of GKN.

To turn to the defence issue, GKN Aerospace has 52 manufacturing locations across 14 countries and turnover of £3.5 billion, much of it defence work. Reference has been made to GKN Aerospace and what it does here and abroad. It supports the British armed forces, such as with the Typhoon, the F-35, the P-8, the A400M, the Chinook, the Apache and the MQ-9. Equally, many of the other platforms that GKN Aerospace is a part of support the armed forces of NATO allies. GKN is a strategic supplier of defence platforms, making canopies for the Typhoon, for example, or being a strategic supplier for the F-35. In factories all over Britain, its role in support of our armed forces and that of our NATO allies is critical.

In a former life, I was chair of the defence unions and worked closely with the Ministry of Defence. Time and again at events and at first hand, I saw GKN on the ground with that intimate relationship with the Ministry
of Defence and our allies. That is why I say to the Minister that he has the power to intervene. The Secretary of State has the power to intervene under section 52 of the Enterprise Act 2002.

Another reason I think this issue is important is that one of the last battles I fought in my former life was the battle against Kraft’s takeover of Cadbury. No one in Britain wanted it. Cadbury was a profitable, iconic battle against Kraft’s takeover of Cadbury. No one in one of the last battles I fought in my former life was the Enterprise Act 2002.

The Government have made some faltering progress in the right direction, but they have gone nowhere near far enough. The Prime Minister has committed to look at the rules and to change them so that we do not have such bids ever again succeeding. Having said that, and however important the future debate is on general takeover regimes, the Government have the powers here and now. They have the grounds. If there is a will, there is a way. I earnestly hope that the Government will respond to the very substantial all-party concern that has been expressed in this place.

I feel a particular passion because I used to represent the people concerned. I have been into the GKN Driveline plant and others; I have seen men and women who are the salt of the earth, with 25, 30, 35 or 40 years’ service, following their mums and dads. I have been into their homes; they have GKN awards and certificates up on their walls. They are proud of who they are and what they do. This country is proud of GKN, and the last thing we want to see is for GKN, that great British engineering icon, to become history.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) on securing this vital debate. As has already been said, GKN has a long and proud history dating back to 1759, when Guest established the ironworks in Dowlais, in Merthyr, south Wales. I suggest that there is no better pedigree than that. Today, the company has developed and expanded so that it operates in 30 countries and employs 6,000 people in the United Kingdom, many in well-paid jobs.

Let us be clear about the nature and the intent of this takeover bid. Melrose is a hedge fund operator, despite what it might say, and an asset stripper, despite its protestations. As other hon. Members have said, that was clearly laid bare by the statement made by Airbus, which has been widely reported and quoted today. The response of the GKN chairman, Mike Turner is interesting. He said:

“The comments from Airbus that stress the need for long-term investment and strategic vision in our industry emphasise our firmly held belief that Melrose is not an appropriate owner of GKN. Its management lacks the relevant experience and its short-term business model”— he is being very polite—“is inappropriate for GKN’s customers and investors.”

That sets out the situation very clearly and succinctly.

I want to focus on the implications for the defence sector in this country. There is a very genuine and real concern about the defence implications of this takeover. GKN is a major defence partner to Boeing and to Airbus, and it supplies and maintains UK defence equipment for the RAF and the Army. Importantly, GKN is very involved with the Typhoon aircraft production; the Chinook and Black Hawk helicopter programmes; the very important F-35 joint fighter aircraft programme; which is coming on-stream now in this country; and the A400M aircraft produced by Airbus. If the GKN takeover comes about, we are likely to see a big question mark over the nature of the successor company’s involvement. Make no mistake: Melrose’s track record shows clearly that it has no interest whatever and no expertise at all in anything related to defence. We are likely to see sell-offs of its defence interests, and that would have major defence implications for this country.

I welcome the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), to the debate. He has said that the takeover puts a question mark over the ownership of intellectual property. If that section of GKN is sold to another firm that is located in another country, the intellectual property goes with it. Who knows what country it may end up in? More than theoretically, it is quite possible that some of the intellectual property rights will go to countries that are not friendly to the United Kingdom.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has a moral reason to be very concerned about the situation, and he has the practical means to intervene. As has been said, under section 42 of the 2002 Act, he can intervene on the grounds of public interest and in section 58 of the Act, public interest in these circumstances can be defined as placing in jeopardy our national security. If the Secretary of State chooses not to intervene now, it may be too late to ever intervene again. The Secretary of State can intervene only if the turnover of a business that is threatened by takeover is greater than £75 million, or the business has more than 25% of market share. It is possible that once the sale of the company takes place, the sale of the company’s assets through downsizing will mean that the Government do not have the legal base to intervene to protect our national interest. That is why I believe that the Government must act.

The Secretary of State for Defence indicated in his evidence to the Defence Committee that he is very concerned about the situation. On 6 March he put his concerns in writing to the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith). He said:

“Both GKN’s existing Board and Melrose have publicly indicated their intentions to restructure, and potentially sell, some elements of the business. I recognise that this will be unsettling for staff who might be affected but the impact of either of these proposals on defence and aerospace jobs is currently unclear.”

It may be unclear to him, but it is not unclear to many others.

I urgently ask that the concerns are delved into in some detail and depth as then they will be apparent for all to see. I hope the Government will bite the bullet and necessarily intervene, to stop this hugely damaging takeover.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) on securing
this important debate on a strategic issue. He raised the long-term aspects of GKN ownership, and gave a warning about the short-term or illusory interest that might be shown towards shareholder gain. He also gave a warning about the relative sizes of the companies and reflected on GKN’s sheer breadth of manufacturing interest in aerospace and automotive.

The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) rightly raised concerns about possible local jobs losses due to the takeover; she indicated that it is very important that pensions protections should be put forward and I will come back to that subject later in my speech.

It is certainly worth underlining the need to invest in young people and in the future by investing in science, technology, engineering and maths skills. It would be remiss of me not to say that that should very much include girls and young women. It should be noted that GKN has committed to young people and STEM subjects. The hon. Lady clearly is not convinced by the proposed takeover by Melrose.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) mentioned the range of assurances that are required about jobs and research and development, which I will come back to. He certainly seems to have no confidence in Melrose. He rightly raised the concern of other local politicians who are involved, including the council leaders and the Mayor. Importantly, he touched on the need for urgent reform of the takeover rules. Perhaps that needs to be looked at a bit more urgently. He also touched on the German model. We know that German manufacturing has been extraordinarily successful because it has been able to take a more long-term view and make long-term investments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) got straight to the nub of the issue with what she said about the UK Government’s strategic positioning and industrial strategy. She rightly warned that without the proper resources and investment in manufacturing, the industrial strategy is very much at risk.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): On that point, let me reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are committed to supporting the sectors that he talks about. We are investing £1.95 billion in aerospace and £1 billion in automotive research.

Drew Hendry: I am grateful for the Minister’s intervention. It is good to know that that is the intention, but as hon. Members around the Chamber mentioned, that investment could be lost with GKN. Members will be interested to know what assurances he can give that that money will actually stay in the UK’s economy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South clearly pointed out the grounds on which the Minister could intervene—I understand that he has difficulties in terms of what he can say about national security and financial stability—and mentioned the uncertainties of Brexit as context for the need to ensure that commitment and stability are maintained. Importantly, she also mentioned that the chief executive of the Pensions Regulator wrote to raise his concerns about the long-term prospects for GKN’s pension scheme.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) rightly talked about workers in his constituency, Airbus’s warning about taking a short-term approach and the need for a long-term strategic vision. He gave dire warnings from history about the severe jobs cuts at Dynacast and the FKI group. He, too, mentioned the GKN pension deficit. I must say that I am not as assured as he is about the pension fund. Whichever company is in control—GKN or Melrose—must ensure that it is properly funded so that people do not lose out. He underlined the fact that the Government have the powers, should they choose to use them in this case, and rightly talked about his pride in GKN.

The hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) concentrated heavily on the fact that Melrose is trying to buy a major player in an industry in which it has no experience. He warned about the potential loss of defence and intellectual property, which the Minister should consider very carefully. His point that this may be the last chance to look at that was poignant, and it should be considered. Several hon. Members mentioned that the benefits of automotive and aerospace are realised over decades. A long-term approach is not only required but demanded by the people who will depend on the jobs, by the companies that will need the skills and by the public purse, and therefore the public services, which will be funded by the tax that is paid. Again, the Government should concentrate heavily on that.

I share the concerns expressed by Members around the Chamber about the rights of workers in these companies and their jobs, and about the fact that we should seek to maintain industrial and engineering capabilities, jobs and skills. I underline again the concerns that were raised about the pension scheme: any diminution of the company’s ability to pay pensions would be deeply troubling. I will not go over the points that other hon. Members made, but that is critical: people who have given their lifetimes to working in the industry should not be abandoned when the time comes for them to draw their pensions. GKN has pointed out that its pension fund has been driven down by Brexit and currency fluctuations. Hon. Members’ national security concerns must also be taken seriously, especially given the intervention on that subject by the Minister’s colleague, the Secretary of State for Defence. The Government must carefully consider all the contributions we have heard in deciding whether they will intervene.

4.7 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) for calling this important debate and acknowledge the many impressive contributions by Members on both sides of the Chamber. We heard that GKN is one of the world’s oldest and most prestigious engineering firms. As an engineer myself, I can imagine people’s pride at knowing they are following in such an illustrious tradition. I appreciate the pride of the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) and my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) at having GKN in their constituencies, and that of other Members, too.

GKN is at the centre of the fourth industrial revolution, boasting of strengths in defence, aerospace, automotive, batteries and the internet of things. My hon. Friend the
Member for West Bromwich West set out the significance of its economic contribution, and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) emphasised the significance of its investment in R&D in the United Kingdom. As the shadow Minister for industrial strategy and a chartered engineer, I believe that all those factors make GKN an important part of our future innovation economy. As my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) and for Caerphilly emphasised, it plays an important part in our national security, too.

Members on both sides of the Chamber critiqued the Melrose bid. Unite, which represents most GKN workers, has called the bid “predatory” and Melrose an “asset-stripper”. It calls for the Government to halt the bid, as does the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). Melrose contests that, but admits that it would cut GKN’s management, deliver a “fundamental” culture change, sell sections of the company and boost the firm’s profitability through what its CEO calls “the catharsis of a change of control.”

It sounds like Melrose is an advocate of Schumpeterian creative destruction, but with little regard for what is destroyed or, indeed, created. In practical terms, that could mean the closure of sites and divisions across the UK, the loss of jobs, a threat to pensions, as we heard, and the disappearance of crucial engineering expertise.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington emphasised, Melrose’s record does little to assuage those concerns. It does not make purchases for the long term. The biggest example is its stewardship of Brush Turbogenerators, bought as part of FKI in 2008. Since then, the firm has had five different managing directors, and just last month it announced that it would cut up to 270 jobs in Loughborough and shift production overseas, despite the fact that last year Melrose paid out bonuses worth £160 million to only four people. My hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) remarked earlier this week that meeting representatives from Melrose was like “meeting neoliberalism in person.”

However troubling we might find Melrose’s practices, this is not about just one company; it is about how our economy works. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy hosted and attended the first meeting of the University College London commission for mission-oriented innovation and industrial strategy, chaired by world-leading economist Mariana Mazzucato. In her new book, she argues that the “two faces of financialisation” are at the heart of capitalism’s fundamental failure. The first is the way in which the financial sector has stopped resourcing the real economy—making stuff. Instead of investing in companies that make stuff, finance is financing finance.

The second aspect is the financialisation of the real economy, with industry driven by short-term returns, which results in less reinvestment of profits and rising burdens of debt in a vicious cycle, which makes industry ever more driven by short-term considerations. Such finance is not neutral but changes the nature of what it finances. As we have seen in Melrose’s approach to managing Brush, its short-termism has led it to neglect the difficult, costly business of maintaining sunk assets such as factories or developing new technologies, such as those we heard about in the automotive sector. Melrose’s expenditure on R&D is proportionally less than a fifth of GKN’s.

Melrose’s track record indicates that it will focus on strategies such as offshoring jobs that neglect people and places but provide an immediate financial return. A Melrose takeover would therefore lead to the financialisation of GKN, placing UK jobs under threat and eroding our industrial base. That was very much the point made by Tom Williams, the chief operating officer of Airbus, when he said it would be practically impossible for his company to give new work to GKN after a Melrose takeover.

The debate is not about Melrose alone but about how our country’s economy works. As the Leader of the Opposition said last month at the EEF conference:

“The next Labour Government will be the first in 40 years to stand up for the real economy. We will take decisive action to make finance the servant of industry, not the masters of all.”

In the immediate term, as Members on both sides have said, there are powers that the Government can use to stop the Melrose takeover. When I mentioned that in the Chamber to the Secretary of State, he said, correctly, that according to the Enterprise Act 2002 he could intervene

“only in mergers that raise public interest concerns on the grounds of national security, financial stability or media plurality.”—[Official Report, 13 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 711.]

As others, including Unite and the BEIS Committee have made clear, the proposed takeover raises national security concerns, given GKN’s close involvement with sensitive defence projects. While the Minister cannot answer in detail, will he answer in principle whether the Government believe that Melrose’s proposed takeover could raise public interest concerns on the grounds of national security? Will he explain what process the Government will go through in reaching a conclusion?

The Secretary of State also praised his Government’s corporate governance reforms, which

“have ensured that GKN had longer to prepare its defence, preventing the kind of smash and grab raid that Cadbury’s was subjected to under the previous Government”.—[Official Report, 13 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 711.]

That has been mentioned in the debate. Kraft’s takeover of Cadbury in January 2010 did prompt changes to the takeover code in 2011 and further amendments to the takeover regime with the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2012, which set up the Competition and Markets Authority. I served on the Bill Committee, when Labour proposed amendments to strengthen the new CMA and broaden the scope of the public interest test. For example, one amendment would have allowed the Secretary of State to consider the effects of the proposed merger on the long-term competitiveness of the UK economy as part of the public interest test.

I sat and watched as the Government voted down amendment after amendment that would have provided them with a framework to act. Will the Government now explore and legislate for the expansion and broadening of the public interest test, which they failed to do six years ago? That would not be without precedent—for example, the financial stability clause, added in 2008 during the financial crisis. Can we tighten the financial
stability test to include considerations of long-term financial viability, as suggested by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black)?

Only this morning, Unilever announced that it will relocate its headquarters from London to Rotterdam. One key factor in that decision was the greater protection afforded to the company by Dutch takeover law. Will the Government look at improving the protection offered by takeover rules to British companies?

Both Dana and Melrose have questions to answer with regard to the future of pension schemes that GKN is currently responsible for. Will the Minister explain what assessment has been made of the schemes and what assurances the Government have sought?

The Secretary of State talks of building an economy for the long term, just as his predecessor did. This is a litmus test for his industrial strategy. It cannot hold if time and time again our most successful and innovative companies are taken over and then taken apart. Investing in innovation is a long-term bet; Melrose is a short-term player. Do the Government have the will to build a high-skill, high-wage, high-productivity economy, or is casino capitalism what our future holds?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I ask him to leave three minutes at the end to allow Adrian Bailey to sum up.

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I think that gives me nine minutes to cover the points and address the issues raised by hon. Members, so, to coin a phrase, I will crack on. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) not only on securing the debate but on the thoughtful, clear tone in which he made his contribution. He has no constituency interest but raises this issue because he cares passionately about the UK economy and our manufacturing industry in particular. I applaud him for that.

The context is important. The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) said we want to be a nation of makers, and it is important to recognise that we have just seen the longest consecutive period of growth in manufacturing in the UK for 50 years. I am therefore pleased to report to the House that manufacturing is in rude health. The United Kingdom is a successful open economy and the Government’s industrial strategy, which has been discussed at length today, will build on our strengths and address our weaknesses to create a Britain fit for the future.

A key part of the UK’s dynamic economy is our mergers regime. Mergers and takeovers can bring benefits to both consumers and the UK economy. I can report to hon. Members that the UK has the third-highest foreign direct investment stock in the world, behind only the US and China. That investment means jobs in growing sectors and opportunities to develop skills, and it helps companies deliver products and services at competitive prices. Mergers and takeovers also provide important opportunities for companies to grow and innovate. Many of the UK’s most successful companies have grown through mergers and takeovers, both in the UK and abroad.

The UK’s merger regime is highly regarded the world over due to its design. The regime, based on transparent rules administered consistently by expert bodies, recognises that decisions are primarily a matter for the shareholders and restricts the role of Ministers to transactions that raise public interest concerns. As a result, the regime offers clarity for businesses and maintains investor confidence.

For example, the takeover code, administered by the independent Takeover Panel, provides a robust framework to ensure that takeovers of listed companies are conducted in an orderly manner with fair treatment of the shareholders. The Takeover Panel has repeatedly strengthened the code. Its most recent changes, which came into effect on 8 January 2018, require bidders to make earlier and fuller disclosure of takeover plans and to give companies subject to a bid more time to prepare their response—the question that the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central raised earlier. Those changes have applied to the bid by Melrose.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I apologise for coming late to the debate. While what the Minister says is absolutely beyond question, does he accept that where the defence of the realm is concerned, certain other considerations must also apply?

Andrew Griffiths: I thank my right hon. Friend, who as always makes a salient and sensible contribution to the debate. I agree with him wholeheartedly that the defence of our nation is the most important point in any of these decisions.

As hon. Members have heard, the Enterprise Act 2002 grants Ministers statutory powers to intervene in mergers that give rise to public interest concerns only on the grounds of national security, financial stability or media plurality. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) raised the issue of that financial stability. It is the financial stability of the country’s economy as a whole. This Government take very seriously our responsibility to protect national security in particular, and we are robust in assessing any possible public interest concerns and carefully considering when those powers should be exercised. If necessary, they will be exercised.

I appreciate that there has been much speculation about the potential use of those powers in this case. However, as we heard earlier, public interest interventions are quasi-judicial in nature. It is therefore important that Ministers act, and are seen to act, impartially, on the basis of an open mind and of the evidence available. For that reason, it is not appropriate for me to comment on their use in this individual case. As hon. Members might expect, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have taken a close interest in events. He has spoken to the chief executive officers of both GKN and Melrose to understand their intentions and to make it clear that he wants an open line with the companies, consistent with his potential statutory role in the process.

The bid, however, is primarily a commercial matter for the parties concerned, and we wait to see how things develop. GKN shareholders now have until 29 March to decide whether to accept the Melrose bid. It has become clear that, regardless of whether the takeover by Melrose is successful, GKN will not be the same company we know today. Beyond the potential sale of
the Driveline, both GKN and Melrose have outlined plans to sell the powder metallurgy business and other non-core businesses. There remains the distinct possibility that, irrespective of which party ultimately controls GKN after the resolution of the bid, it will choose to sell all or parts of GKN’s current business to foreign companies.

On 13 March, Melrose wrote to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee at its request, setting out the company’s position on pensions and post-offer undertakings. In addition to the conversations held between the Government and the parties involved, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central, who raised the question of Unite, will be pleased to know that the Secretary of State has been in close contact with the union.

I know that some hon. Members have concerns about GKN’s pension schemes. Individual cases are a matter for the independent Pensions Regulator, but the Government are aware that the parties are in discussions with the pension trustees, who have made their expectations clear. The hon. Member for West Bromwich West raised the issue of R&D investment; Melrose has told the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee that it supports R&D and will maintain the level of investment in R&D that GKN has spent in the past, which I think was 2.2% of sales between 2014 and 2016.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the question of how France and Germany could block takeovers. The reality is that they cannot. The UK’s takeover rules are based on EU takeover rules, which apply to all European countries and limit the ability of national Governments to block mergers unless they are based on national security, financial stability or media plurality grounds. France and Germany would also be unable to block a takeover of that kind due to EU takeover rules.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) is a doughty fighter for her constituents, and I know how passionate she is about this issue. She asked whether we are confident about the assurances Melrose has given about the UK headquarters. Under the takeover code, companies can make legally binding post-offer undertakings, and that is an important element. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South raised the question of pensions. Of course, it is a matter for the Pensions Regulator and it would be inappropriate for me to comment; however, the Government understand that the Pensions Regulator is in discussion with all parties.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry)—I hope I got that right—asked what assurances we can give that Government R&D investment will stay in the UK. I can tell him that Government grants to support R&D are awarded on the basis of R&D carried out in this country, so the conditions of any contract with Government would mean that those responsibilities would transfer to the new company.

Drew Hendry: I appreciate the Minister’s giving way in the limited time he has. I want to make it clear that my concern was that the investment, and therefore the resulting intellectual property, might be lost elsewhere.

Andrew Griffiths: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch asks what the Government are doing to further strengthen the codes. I will highlight that the Government are exploring proposals to strengthen our powers to scrutinise investment for national security purposes, which would bring our regime in line with those of other developed countries. The national security and infrastructure investment review that my hon. Friend talked about closed in January, and the Government will publish its firm proposals in a White Paper this year.

The Government will continue to monitor the situation very closely over the days and weeks ahead, and I can assure hon. Members that we will always act in the best interests of the country.

Mr Bailey: My experience of parliamentary scrutiny of takeover bids, from Kraft and Cadbury to Pfizer and AstraZeneca and, I hope, this one, is that, irrespective of the outcome, the fact that Parliament has scrutinised it has benefited the outcome—first, by holding the Government to account, and secondly, by holding the participant companies to account.

I make no apologies for having the debate, because I feel it is performing an essential role of Parliament. Today’s debate has demonstrated that, by demonstrating the unanimous strength of opinion on both sides of this House on the issues arising from this particular takeover bid, and the earnest desire that the Government use all the powers they have to intervene in the best interests of not just GKN but our economy, our productivity, our employment, our pensions and so on.

I understand the quasi-judicial role that the Government have in this matter and how that might inhibit any public pronouncement, but in this debate we have spoken clearly and demanded action. The debate reflects the opinion of Parliament in general, and I ask the Minister to act in the best interests of GKN and our economy.
Written Statements

Monday 5 March 2018

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Agriculture and Fisheries Council took place in Brussels on 19 February. Counsellor Rory O’Donnell represented the UK.

The most substantive Council discussion was an exchange of views on “the future of food and farming”, a continuation of early discussion of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) post 2020. Member states agreed on the importance of direct payments in providing income stability to farmers. The UK signposted a future domestic agriculture policy based on rewarding farmers for public goods.

The Council moved on to a discussion of possible revisions to the EU bioeconomy strategy. Member states were in agreement that the agricultural sector would benefit from a greater role in the bioeconomy, particularly in exploring new methods of adding value in agricultural supply chains.

The European Commission provided Council with information on an EU protein plan. The UK welcomed the plan, and particularly planned actions to tackle deforestation.

Three further items were discussed under “any other business”:

the European Commission presented information to Council on the rural Africa task force
the Polish delegation presented a paper to Council on rural development in the CAP post 2020
the Agriculture Ministers of the Visegrad member states presented a joint declaration to the Council on “the future of food and farming”.

Until the UK leaves the European Union, the UK remains a full member of the EU and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. The outcome of our negotiations with the EU on the future partnership will determine what arrangements apply in relation to EU legislation in future.

HOME DEPARTMENT


The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The 2016 annual report from the Independent Monitor is being published today on www.gov.uk. A copy of the report will also be placed in the House Library.

[HCWS507]

Licensing Hours: Royal Wedding

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The Government have consulted on a proposal to make a Licensing Hours Extension Order under section 172 of the Licensing Act 2003 to relax licensing hours nationally to celebrate the wedding of HRH Prince Henry and Ms Meghan Markle on 19 May 2018. Following this consultation, the Government have decided to extend licensing hours on the nights of Friday 18 and Saturday 19 May until 1 am the following mornings to mark this occasion of national celebration.

The order will apply to the sale of alcohol for consumption on the premises and the provision of late-night refreshment in premises already licensed to sell alcohol for consumption on the premises in England and Wales.


Copies will also be placed in the House Library.

[HCWS506]

Safeguarding Children and Protection

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) and I have today published the Government’s response to the consultation exercise on reporting and acting on child abuse and neglect.

The consultation, which ran from 21 July 2016 to 13 October 2016, sought views on key issues relating to the child protection system and on the possible introduction of one of two new statutory measures, namely:

a mandatory reporting duty, which would require certain practitioners or organisations to report child abuse or neglect if they knew, or had reasonable cause to suspect, it was taking place; or

a duty to act, which would require certain practitioners or organisations to take appropriate action in relation to child abuse or neglect if they knew, or had reasonable cause to suspect, it was taking place.

All children have the right to be safe from harm. Keeping children safe is the responsibility of everyone who comes into contact with children and families, and we all have a role to play in protecting children and young people from child abuse and neglect.

The legal duties the Government consulted on would involve a particular focus on practitioners: across children’s social care, the police, health, education, and other sectors. The vast majority of such practitioners are committed to doing all they can to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, through recognising children’s needs early and taking action so that children receive the right support at the right time.

We are absolutely clear that practitioners should make an immediate referral to local authority children’s social care if they believe that a child has suffered harm or is
likely to do so, as set out in statutory guidance already.

We know, however, that despite the best efforts of practitioners working with children and families, some abuse and neglect continues to go undetected by statutory agencies. This can happen for a variety of reasons, including failures to report or share information properly, and failure to perceive abuse or understand the nature and level of the risk faced by children.

In circumstances where professionals fail to identify or fail to report the signs of abuse and neglect, the consequences can be catastrophic. However, triennial analysis of serious case reviews demonstrates that in most cases the significant harm or death of children occurs despite their being known to children's social care. So the issues are complex and challenging and introducing a new statutory duty is not a simple, straightforward solution, as some argue.

We received 768 responses to the consultation exercise, from a wide range of interests including practitioners and others in the education, health, social care and local government sectors, children's charities, survivors' groups, the police and members of the public. We have considered all the responses and relevant issues carefully.

The majority of respondents (63%) were in favour of allowing the Government's existing programme of reforms time to be implemented before considering additional statutory measures. Only a quarter (25%) of respondents favoured introducing a duty to act, with less than half of that number (12%) favouring the introduction of a mandatory reporting duty.

Given the consultation outcome and after careful consideration, we have concluded that the case for the introduction of a mandatory reporting duty or a duty to act has not been made, and would not, against the landscape of our current arrangements, deliver better protection for children. Therefore, neither of these proposals will be taken forward at this time. We will implement the reforms set out in the Government's response and evaluate whether this is having the intended impact once these are embedded, in addition to continuing to assess any new or different evidence supporting the need for further changes.

We remain committed to examining all options to improve further the children's social care system and tackle abuse in all its forms. In addition to our already wide-ranging programme of reforms, we will therefore focus on taking steps to address the key issues raised by respondents to the consultation. This action includes:

- improving multi-agency working, in particular through strengthening information sharing for safeguarding purposes, including better local arrangements;
- publishing our revised “Working Together to Safeguard Children” statutory guidance and launching a further phase of the communications campaign, “Together, we can tackle child abuse” ahead of its publication;
- looking at the current legislative framework to assess whether it is able to deal appropriately with concerns about concealment of child abuse and neglect; and
- continuing our work to improve the training, accreditation and regulation of practitioners, so that they can better safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

To repeat, every child deserves to and must be protected from abuse and neglect. We are determined to do all that we can to strengthen our child protection system in ways which we expect will bring real benefits to children.


[HCWS508]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Planning Policy

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The Government have made it clear that we need to get our country building. At Budget 2017 we set out reforms to enable us to achieve 300,000 homes built each year by the middle of the next decade. The Housing White Paper, published in February last year, set out our plans. In September, we launched the planning for the right homes in the right places consultation, which introduced a standardised formula for calculating local housing need.

Today we are publishing our response and launching the next step: consultations on the revised national planning policy framework and the reform of developer contributions.

This planning reform package, which includes the revised draft national planning policy framework (NPPF) and reforms to developer contributions, are fundamental to delivering the homes we need and set out a comprehensive approach to ensure that we get the right homes built in the right places of the right quality.

The policy proposals only relate to England. The consultation will run from 5 March until 10 May 2018.

Copies of the consultation document will be placed in the House Library and are available on the Government’s website here:


An oral statement will be delivered to both Houses later today.

[HCWS505]
**Written Statements**

*Tuesday 6 March 2018*

**TREASURY**

**ECOFIN: 20 February 2018**

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):
A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Brussels on 20 February 2018. The UK was represented by Mark Bowman, director general, international and EU, HM Treasury. EU Finance Ministers discussed the following:

*Early morning session*

The Eurogroup President briefed Ministers on the outcomes of the 19 February meeting of the Eurogroup, and the Commission provided an update on the current economic situation in the EU. Ministers also discussed developments regarding United States tax reform. **Appointment of the vice-president of the European Central Bank**

The Council agreed a recommendation confirming the nomination of Luis de Guindos as vice-president of the European Central Bank. **Financial services legislation**

The Bulgarian presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services. **Sustainable finance**

The Council exchanged views on the recommendations of the high-level expert group on sustainable finance. **Discharge of the 2016 EU budget**

Ministers approved a Council recommendation to the European Parliament on the discharge to be given to the Commission in respect of the implementation of the 2016 EU budget. **EU budget guidelines for 2019**

Ministers adopted Council conclusions on the guidelines for the 2019 budget, which will serve as a point of reference in the forthcoming budgetary cycle. **Public procurement and strategic investment**

The Commission presented information on the public procurement strategy it adopted on 3 October 2017. **Financial Services**

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Following the Financial Conduct Authority’s (FCA) announcement that it has now concluded its enforcement investigations into the Co-op Bank and related individuals, I have today laid a direction before Parliament requiring the Prudential Regulation Authority (PRA) to carry out an independent review into the prudential supervision of the Co-operative Bank between 2008 and 2013, using powers under section 77 of the Financial Services Act 2012.

In November 2013, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the Government’s intention to direct the regulators to launch an investigation into the events at the Co-operative Bank, following its withdrawal from the bidding process to purchase 632 bank branches from Lloyds Banking Group — known as Project Verde. It was stated at the time that this review would not take place until the conclusion of all regulatory enforcement action relating to the Co-operative Bank. Today’s announcement by the FCA means that this has now happened.

The review will look at the actions, policies and approach of the Financial Services Authority, and latterly the PRA, as the institutions with statutory responsibility for the prudential supervision of the Co-op Bank during the period in question. It will focus on the outstanding questions identified by the House of Commons Treasury Committee in its 2014 report ‘Project Verde’ (HC 728-I). As recommended by the Committee, the review will have access to all relevant documents and correspondence, including the record of Government contacts concerning the Lloyds “Verde” bidding process.

I have approved the PRA’s appointment of Mr Mark Zelmer to carry out the independent review on its behalf. The review is expected to run for 12 months, after which HM Treasury will publish a report of the review’s findings. A copy of this report will be laid before Parliament.

The Government are committed to creating a stronger and safer banking system. A vital part of this is ensuring that our regulatory system can learn from past events. The launch of this independent review is a further demonstration of this commitment. **Double Taxation Convention: United Kingdom and Mauritius**

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): A protocol to the Double Taxation Convention with Mauritius was signed on 28 February 2018. The text of the Protocol is available on HM Revenue and Customs’ pages of the gov.uk website and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The text will be scheduled to pages of the Protocol is available on HM Revenue and Customs’

**DEFENCE**

**Contingent Liability**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Guto Bebb): I am pleased to inform the House that I am today laying a departmental minute to advise that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) has received approval in principle from Her Majesty’s Treasury (HMT) to recognise new contingent liabilities associated with the Astute boat 7 “whole boat” contract. Negotiations are ongoing and the contingent liabilities will come into force on signature of the contract.

The departmental minute describes the contingent liability that the MOD will hold as a result of placing the Astute boat 7 “whole boat” contract, which will provide for the production and testing of the vessel. The maximum contingent liability against the MOD is unquantifiable and will remain until the out of service date of the submarine.
It is usual to allow a period of 14 sitting days prior to accepting a contingent liability, to provide Members of Parliament an opportunity to raise any objections.

Within the boat 7 contract, BAE Systems Marine Ltd limit their exposure to product liability to £1 billion per incident and £300 million in any 12-month period. This limits the contractor’s exposure for claims by the MOD for losses associated with the product being defective or deficient, and creates an exposure for MOD to third party claims against the contractor for losses associated with the product being defective or deficient. It is the view of the Department that the likelihood of any claim is remote.

The boat 7 contract also includes a narrative Shipbuilders Risks Indemnity (SRI) condition rather than Defence Condition (DEFCON) 663 which would provide a standard form of SRI.

[HCWS516]

National Employer Advisory Board

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):
The Ministry of Defence (MOD) has conducted a review of the role and status of the National Employer Advisory Board (NEAB), a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department.

The review found that the NEAB had made a major contribution to shaping Defence’s relationships with employers, particularly in connection with the Future Reserves 2020 White Paper (2013). However, although there was a continuing requirement for support in this area, the scale of need, in the foreseeable future, was unlikely to be sufficient to justify a standing board, constituted as a non-departmental public body; and committed to meeting a set number of times each year.

After careful consideration, I have decided that the NEAB should be dis-established with effect from 1 April 2018. In doing so, I have taken account of the growing success of defence relationship management (DRM)¹, and the emergence of other ad hoc sources of advice on employer issues, which together are now well placed to meet our current requirements in this area.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the chairman and individual members, past and present, for all they have done to support the MOD.

¹ Defence Relationship Management, a Future Reserves 2020 White Paper commitment, was created in 2014 to manage the MOD’s relationship with employers in support of the Defence People objectives including the recruitment and retention of reserves; resettlement of service leavers; rehabilitation of wounded, injured and sick; and improving employment opportunities for service spouses and partners.

[HCWS514]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Water Supplies: Severe Weather

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The exceptionally cold spell last week and the rapid thaw that followed has caused widespread water supply issues in the country. Over the weekend and at the start of the week tens of thousands of people across the south-east of England have experienced loss of water supply in their homes and even more have had to cope with low water pressure following leaks from burst pipes. We recognise that this has been a difficult time for many residents and businesses.

The immediate priority is to get water back up and running for those people who have been affected, in particular vulnerable people, and businesses, hospitals and care homes. Water companies have been following standard practice including isolating bursts and redirecting water to mitigate this problem. Bottled water has been provided in the areas most badly affected and water has been provided by tanker to keep hospitals open.

Today I have chaired a meeting of water company chief executives, OFWAT and Water UK to make sure that water companies in England are working to restore supplies as quickly as possible, and that water companies in other parts of the country are preparing for the thaw as it spreads across the country, including learning any lessons from places that have already experienced higher temperatures.

The challenge the sector faces is the sheer number of bursts following the rapid change in weather across multiple companies’ networks. Many of these have been relatively small and difficult to detect; some of the loss of pressure is due to leaks in private homes and businesses.

Water companies have been working hard to address the issues. This includes increasing their staff on the ground out identifying where bursts have occurred and repairing them, as well as moving water across their networks to balance supply across the areas they serve. We should recognise the efforts of the engineers and all involved working through the night to fix these problems. Once the situation is restored to normal we expect OFWAT to review the performance of the companies during this period.

This Government actively support a properly regulated water sector. We have high expectations of water companies on increasing their investment in their water and sewerage networks. This was laid out clearly in the strategic policy statement issued to OFWAT last September, and reinforced by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs last week when he addressed the water industry and said that he expects the industry to increase investment and to improve services by maintaining a resilient network, fixing leaks promptly where they occur and preparing for severe weather.

[HCWS509]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): States parties to the biological and toxin weapons convention (BTWC) held their annual meeting 4 to 8 December 2017. This was the first such meeting since the convention’s eighth review conference in November 2016, on which I made a statement to the House on 10 January 2017, Official Report, Vol. 634, column 8WS.

The convention is one of the foundation stones of the international disarmament and arms control system. The UK, one of the convention’s three depositary Governments, is strongly committed to its effective and universal implementation as an essential instrument in...
helping combat and mitigate the threats posed by biological warfare. Our objectives are to enable the convention to remain relevant in addressing the evolving threats of biological or toxin weapons being developed or used, and to keep pace with the rapid and diverse advances in many fields of science and technology.

At December’s meeting of states parties, we sought to agree a substantive new programme of work to advance our objectives, through a series of expert technical meetings leading up to the next review conference in 2021. The UK, with the US and Russia, the two other depositary Governments for the convention, worked with many other states throughout 2017 to build consensus around common elements of such a substantive new work programme.

I am pleased to inform the House that this hard work is paying dividends. States parties joined consensus to agree a new programme of expert meetings each year from 2018 up to and including 2020. The meetings will discuss issues such as the preparedness and response to any potential use of biological and toxin weapons, and developments in science and technology. The agreed programme will discuss and promote common understanding and effective action on these issues, aiming to strengthen the implementation of the convention as a whole to respond to evolving challenges. Importantly, future annual meetings of states parties have authority to respond to these expert discussions, including by taking necessary budgetary and financial measures by consensus with a view to ensuring the proper implementation of the work programme.

This outcome was the product of determined diplomacy over a number of years. The achievement is all the more notable after the disappointing result of the 2016 review conference, and a cycle of relatively unproductive meetings which had lowered expectations of progress on a more ambitious work plan.

The UK will continue to work hard to support further tangible progress towards universal and effective national implementation of the convention, and to enable it to maintain its relevance and vital role as a keystone agreement in the broader international disarmament and non-proliferation architecture.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Abortions in England for Women in Northern Ireland

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): On 29 June 2017, the then Minister for Women and Equalities wrote to MPs and informed them that women normally resident in Northern Ireland would no longer be charged for abortions received in England. An update informing the House of progress was given on 23 October 2017. The scheme is now in place and I am pleased to provide a further update.

The three main providers of abortions in England have been awarded grants by the Department of Health and Social Care to fund service provision in England for women resident in Northern Ireland. The cost of this service will be met by the Government Equalities Office with additional funding provided by HM Treasury. A small number of procedures will continue to be provided through the NHS where this is necessary for medical reasons. NHS providers will reimbursed by the Department of Health and Social Care.

Women from Northern Ireland seeking medical support in England are eligible for:

- A consultation with an abortion provider in England, including an assessment of whether the legal grounds for an abortion are met;
- The abortion procedure;
- HIV or sexually transmitted infection testing as appropriate;
- An offer of contraception from the abortion provider; and
- Support with travel costs if the woman meets financial hardship criteria.

This is comparable with the experience that women in England receive.

We have established a central booking service that will be run by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service. The central booking service will simplify the process for women who choose to access these services. It means that women from Northern Ireland will have a single telephone number to call and an appointment will be made with the most appropriate provider, based on the woman’s requirements, her medical condition and the availability of the providers. The central booking service has been up and running since 1 March 2018.

This scheme does not change the position in relation to the provision of abortions in Northern Ireland. Our scheme does not include the provision of any services in Northern Ireland.
Embedded Technology: Cultural Sector

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): I am delighted to announce the publication of “Culture is Digital”. A link to the report can be found here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-is-digital.

The UK’s future will be at the nexus of our artistic and cultural creativity and our technical brilliance. The UK has a proud history of both cultural and technological excellence: from its world class museums, historic buildings, monuments, theatres and festivals to being a pioneer of computing and its role in the development of artificial intelligence which have changed the world. Today, the UK ranks second globally in terms of the soft power it projects through its cultural offering with cultural organisations and practitioners contributing £27 billion to the economy. Meanwhile the digital sector contributes £117 billion to the economy and remains one of the fastest growing segments of the economy.

Aligning with the aim of the Government’s industrial strategy to build on the UK’s strengths, and capitalise on the opportunities before us, our “Cultural is Digital” report looks to build on the twin UK strengths of creative and technology skills, focusing on the use of digital technology to drive our creative sector’s global status and engage audiences with new creative experiences.

“Culture is Digital” focuses on three themes: how cultural organisations can better use technology and data to serve audiences; improving the digital skills of the sector; and a future strategy section on the need to engage with new technology and for there to be many more collaborations between technology and cultural organisations of all sizes.

The cultural and technology sectors have together come forward with 12 policy commitments within the report to help mainline technology within the cultural sector. This report marks a staging process in the overall report to help mainline technology within the cultural sector and Government will continue to monitor progress and offer support. By delivering on each of the elements of this report, I believe we will cement our position as a world-leading cultural power and thrill even more audiences.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Prison Accommodation: Nigeria

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): On 9 January 2014, the United Kingdom signed a compulsory prisoner transfer agreement with Nigeria. As part of this agreement, eligible prisoners serving criminal sentences in Nigeria and the UK can be returned to complete their sentences in their respective countries. In support of this, and to help improve the capacity of the Nigerian prison service, the Government have agreed to build a UN compliant 112 bed wing in Kiri Kiri Prison, Lagos. Tenders have been placed and a supplier identified to conduct the building work, alongside project support and monitoring and evaluation, bringing the total cost to £695,525. This project is funded from the CSSF (conflict, stability and security fund) migration returns fund.

The provision of this assistance is in line with the Government’s security and stability objectives in West Africa. FCO officials carry out regular reviews of our programmes in Nigeria to ensure funding is directed only to approved recipients.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Justice and Home Affairs Pre-Council Statement

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The EU Justice and Home Affairs Council of Ministers will meet on 8 and 9 March in Brussels. I will represent the UK for interior day.

Interior day (8 March) will begin with 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 Government support improving co-operation in this area and I will endorse this work.

This will be followed by an exchange of views on the implementation of the directive on the use of passenger name record (PNR) data. The UK has existing capability for processing PNR data in Europe, was at the forefront of advocating the need for an EU tool in this area, and continues to offer advice and support to member states in the development of their own capabilities.

There will be an exchange of views on co-operation with the western Balkans in the area of internal security and counter-terrorism. Ministers will discuss how to help build capacities in the western Balkans and to facilitate co-operation against threats from organised crime and terrorism, in light of the Western Balkans strategy, published in February. The Government broadly support these high-level counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism objectives and recognise the importance of effective work in these areas in the western Balkans.

Over lunch, Ministers will discuss ways of combating terrorist content online. I will share recent global developments made in preventing terrorist use of the internet. This includes developments within industry, which have been driven by our efforts in the UK and through partnerships including with EU member states and the Commission. I will also note the progress made by the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism and the complementary role it plays with the EU internet forum. I will also update Ministers on the Home Secretary’s recent visit to see the US tech industry in Silicon Valley, where she discussed how to make sure terrorist use of the internet does not simply shift to less well-resourced platforms as the large companies clean up their act.

In the afternoon, Interior Ministers will discuss JHA agencies’ role in counter-terrorism. Discussion will focus on the potential future strategic direction of co-operation, including between JHA agencies; improving engagement with priority third countries; and increasing the number...
of CT experts based within the agencies. The Government are broadly supportive of these measures, which will enhance co-operation and increase expertise, and which in turn will make better use of the existing mechanisms and structures.

There will then be a policy debate on the proposed regulation on establishing a framework for interoperability between EU information systems. The legislation aims to create a more joined-up approach to EU JHA databases to prevent criminals and terrorists exploiting the gaps between them. The Government are assessing if these proposals would provide benefits to the UK, in particular if they would make UK law enforcement agencies' searching of data more efficient and represent value for money. These considerations will then inform whether the UK will opt in to the new systems.

On migration, the presidency will update on progress and the way forward on managing Mediterranean migration to build upon the concerted efforts across the EU last year which saw a marked reduction in the number of flows arriving in Europe in 2017. The UK supports the proposals as they align with our “whole of route” approach, which seeks to intervene at every stage of the migrant journey to reduce illegal migration and promote safe and orderly migration. I will be highlighting recent UK efforts in this space, including our record on resettlement having now resettled over 10,000 vulnerable refugees who have fled the Syrian crisis since 2014 as part of our commitment to resettle 20,000 refugees by 2020.

Justice day (9 March) will begin with a discussion on whether the recast of the Brussels Ila regulation should include a provision that obliges member states to ensure central authorities have sufficient financial and human resources to fulfil their role. The Government support adequate resourcing of central authorities, but do not believe that a provision to that effect should be included in the proposal, as such matters should be for member states to decide.

A general approach will be sought for the proposed directive on combating fraud and counterfeiting of non-cash means of payment, which aims to address the shortfalls of existing EU legislation in addressing the challenges in this area from organised crime. The UK has not opted in to this directive.

The presidency will give an update on the preparatory steps needed to be taken to ensure that the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO) becomes operational in 2020. As the UK will not be participating in the EPPO, we will not intervene on this item.

The Commission will then provide an update on its work to improve law enforcement access to cross-border e-evidence. We expect the Commission to propose a legislative proposal in this area in March. The Government recognise that this is an important issue to address but we want to ensure that the proposals do not duplicate any of the existing or proposed EU legislation or other international agreements in this space and that they do not jeopardise the existing practical co-operation we have with communication service providers.

The working lunch will discuss radicalisation in prisons. This is an opportunity to highlight the UK’s approach to counter-terrorism and counter-extremism in prisons, and our commitment to working closely with our European partners to respond to common challenges in this area.

In addition to the substantive agenda items, the Commission will present to Justice Ministers its recommendation on illegal content on online platforms and its impact on the work under the code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech.

PRIME MINISTER

Intimidation in Public Life Review: Government Response

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Today, I am pleased we are laying before both Houses the Government’s response to the 17th report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life on intimidation in public life.

In July 2017, I asked the independent Committee on Standards in Public Life to undertake a review into the issue of abuse and intimidation experienced by parliamentary candidates, including those who stood in the 2017 general election campaign. Concerns were highlighted by those across the political spectrum. The Committee published a comprehensive report in December.

The Government would like to again thank the Committee for their considered and thorough report. Today we publish the Government’s response to the report, which addresses the roles of the main players—Government, social media, the law, policing and prosecution, and political parties—and the range of actions the Government will take in both the immediate and longer-term.

It is not just politicians who have experienced unwarranted abuse—it has included journalists and other prominent figures in public life. Everyone deserves to be treated with tolerance and respect, and the British liberties of freedom of speech and freedom of association must always operate within the law. All those in public life need to demonstrate their opposition to intimidation and call it out, and report it when they see it. We must all work together to combat this issue.
Written Statements

Thursday 8 March 2018

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

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 in Brussels on Tuesday 27 February. The items on the agenda were: presentation of the priorities of the Bulgarian presidency; annotated draft agenda for the European Council on 22 and 23 March 2018; and rule of law in Poland. I intervened to emphasise the importance the UK places on the rule of law and judicial independence, and that the UK expects its partners to respect international norms. I affirmed the UK’s view that responsibility for constitutional issues lies primarily with national Governments and welcomed the improved dialogue between the Commission and Poland. I highlighted that a solution is most likely to be found in this dialogue leading to a common understanding on how to resolve the issue in a way which aligns with international norms.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Domestic Abuse

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Justice and I are today launching a consultation which seeks to address domestic abuse at every stage from prevention through to rehabilitation.

Domestic abuse is an inexcusable and devastating form of abuse that can have a lifelong impact on its victims and their families. There are approximately two million reported victims every year, and domestic abuse accounts for over 10% of all police recorded crime and nearly 20% of all police charges.

This Government have taken strong action to tackle domestic abuse. We are the first country to criminalise coercive and controlling behaviour, and we have introduced domestic violence protection orders and the domestic violence disclosure scheme. We have made legislative changes to legal aid to make it more accessible. Last year we also amended electoral law to make it easier for survivors of domestic abuse to register to vote, while keeping their name and address private.

In addition this year we have introduced a Secure Tenancies (Victims of Domestic Abuse) Bill that will maintain the status of survivors living in social housing with an existing lifetime tenancy when they move to a new social property. We have provided £20 million for accommodation-based services such as refuges, which is already providing 2,200 additional beds in refuges and safe accommodation benefiting 19,000 victims. The best available data shows bed spaces have increased by 10% since 2010 and we are committed to supporting refuges and providing stable funding in the future.

We are reviewing the way in which refuges and supported housing are delivered and have heard the concerns about how our proposals will work in practice. We are working with all the charities and organisations working on the frontline, asking them to come forward with their ideas on how best to deliver this. That process is ongoing—and we have been clear no options are off the table as we work with them to ensure women requiring support in their time of need are not let down.

However we know there is more to do and that is why this Government are committed to transforming how we think about and tackle domestic abuse. We want victims to feel supported so that they can seek help and to rebuild their lives, safe in the knowledge that their perpetrator will be pursued and prosecuted.
The consultation seeks views under the four main themes set out below with the central aim of prevention running through each.

Promote awareness—proposals to help put domestic abuse at the top of everyone’s agenda, and raise public and professionals’ awareness.

Protect and support—proposals to enhance the safety of victims and the support that they receive.

Pursue and deter—proposals to ensure an effective response to perpetrators from initial police response through to conviction and management of offenders (including rehabilitation).

Improve performance—proposals to drive consistency and better performance in the response to domestic abuse across all local areas and agencies/sectors.

The Government welcome responses from victims and survivors, charities, specialist organisations, experts and professionals across policing, criminal justice, health, welfare, education, social services, employment and local authorities who deal with these issues on a daily basis.

We are seeking a combination of legislative and non-legislative solutions for delivering the proposals set out in the consultation. Where primary legislation is required, the responses to the consultation will inform the content of the draft Domestic Abuse Bill announced in the Queen’s speech.

The consultation will run for 12 weeks to 31 May.

A copy of the consultation paper will be placed in the Library of the House and will be available online at www.gov.uk.  

[HCWS525]

**National Crime Agency Remuneration Review Body**

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The National Crime Agency (NCA) Remuneration Review Body has made recommendations on pay and allowances for NCA officers designated with operational powers, and observations on the NCA’s proposals to reform pay arrangements. I would like to thank the chair and members of the review body for their careful consideration of the evidence from the NCA, the Home Office, HMT and the trade unions.

The Government are committed to the delivery of world-class public services, and ensuring that public sector workers are fairly remunerated for the vitally important work that they do. That is why we ended the pay freeze for public sector workforce in September 2017. We recognised that some flexibility would be required in certain areas.

Each workforce is different and pay awards should therefore reflect the particular circumstances faced by those public workers and their recruitment and retention levels. It is also vital that our world-class public services continue modernising to maximise the contribution of our public servants, so they can continue to do their incredible work, improving our lives and keeping us safe.

Previous review body reports highlighted the need for reform to NCA pay arrangements and I welcome the review body’s support for the NCA’s proposed changes as an important step in that direction. There are two main elements to the pay reform: officers in two grades performing intelligence and investigator roles can opt into a new spot rate pay structure; and for the remaining workforce existing pay bands are being compressed. These changes are highly targeted, focusing on roles where there is evidence that pay has fallen significantly behind the market rate, and critical to the agency’s ability to improve productivity and transform to meet the rapidly evolving threat from serious and organised crime. This targeted pay reform will support the NCA’s ability to recruit and retain highly skilled staff to continue to fulfil their vital role.

To support implementation of these changes, the 2017-18 award will be backdated to 1 August 2017 and the 2018-19 award implemented on 1 August 2018. The award is as follows:

A varied award for staff in two targeted operational grades choosing to opt into the new pay structure and move onto new terms and conditions, including an increase in contracted hours;

A minimum 1% award for all officers not eligible for the new pay structure and not already receiving the pay range maximum for their grade;

A 1% award made up of consolidated and non-consolidated elements for officers not eligible for the new pay structure and already in receipt of the maximum for their grade or reaching it;

A 1% increase to the London weighting payment in 2017-18. 2018-19 will be determined following a formal review of the allowance.

These awards will be fully funded within the NCA’s existing budget. The small number of officers electing to remain on the terms and conditions of pre-cursor organisations will remain on their 2016-17 pay rates.

Copies of the NCA Remuneration Review Body’s report are available in the Vote Office and at gov.uk.  

[HCWS526]

**NORTHERN IRELAND**

**Finances**

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): During the course of the past 13 months, in the absence of an Executive and Assembly in Northern Ireland, the UK Government have worked tirelessly to facilitate the restoration of devolved Government. It had been my firm hope that a new Executive would be in place to set a budget. That will not now be possible in time for plans to be put in place for the forthcoming financial year.

Yet there are acute pressures across public services to be addressed in 2018-19, and clarity is required now to enable planning to proceed for the year ahead. It is now imperative, therefore, that the UK Government provide clarity and certainty around Northern Ireland finances for 2018-19.

2018-19 Budget allocations

I set out below the resource and capital allocations which I consider to be the most balanced and appropriate settlement for Northern Ireland Departments. It would be open to a restored Executive, of course, to consider and revise the position I have set out.

In deciding on these allocations I have engaged intensively with the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) to understand the needs of Departments as they continue
to work to deliver the draft programme for Government. I have reflected too on the response to the budget briefing published by the NICS before Christmas, and discussed the budget situation with the main parties in Northern Ireland.

In the absence of local Ministers, and given the proximity of the next financial year, it would not be appropriate for the UK Government to seek to take fundamental decisions about service delivery and transformation at this time. Yet we must take time to secure public services and enable NI departments to meet urgent pressures in health and education. That is what this budget settlement will do, by protecting and preserving public services within challenging fiscal constraints.

On the resource side, it delivers real-terms increases for health and education from their 2017-18 opening baseline. It also delivers cash terms increases for the Departments of Justice; Infrastructure; and Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Elsewhere, Departments would either be cash-flat or see small decreases, with notable reductions only for the two central Departments (Finance and the Executive Office). For capital, it provides a strong basis for investment and enables key flagship projects to progress.

Confidence and Supply funding

This settlement also delivers £410 million in financial support arising from the financial annex to the confidence and supply agreement between the Conservative Party and the Democratic Unionist Party.

This includes £80 million in support for immediate health and education pressures; £30 million to support programmes to address issues of mental health and severe deprivation; £100 million for ongoing work to transform the health service in line with the broad-based consensus fostered by the Bengoa report; and a £200 million boost in capital spending for key infrastructure projects. Furthermore, in recognition of the lack of opportunity for more fundamental service reconfiguration over the last 12 months, this Budget position allows for £100 million in flexibility to enable existing capital funding to be used to address public services resource pressures in 2018-19. This additional funding will be transferred in due course only with Parliament’s full authorisation, in line with the long-established estimates process.

Transformation

But, as the NICS budget briefing made clear, transformation is needed in a number of areas to make services sustainable in the long term. The urgent work to prepare for this must proceed. To that end, the budget includes a £4 million fund to prepare the ground for transformation, alongside the £100 million set out for health transformation above. I also recognise that this budget only allocates resources for 2018-19 and the NI Departments will need urgently to plan for future years. In that context, it is right that the NICS should continue to take forward preparatory work which could assist with balancing the budget in 2019-20. This will ensure that options are kept open for a restored Executive to consider as part of future budget processes.

Regional rate

As part of setting a budget, it is essential that the UK Government provide clarity on the regional rate. This budget position has been constructed on the basis of an increase in the domestic regional rate of 4.5%. I consider that this is a necessary and important step to continue to support public services, particularly in health and education. The non-domestic rates would rise only at 1.5%, in line with inflation. Conscious of the interest of many stakeholders in the scheme, I can also confirm that this budget settlement would provide the basis for the small business rate relief to continue.

Implementing decisions within the overall allocations

This statement outlines overall allocations, based on my assessment of the options currently available to the NI Departments. To the extent possible, the consequent prioritisation of resources within NI Departments will need to be undertaken by permanent secretaries, as has been the case during the past year. The position will be monitored throughout the year and, where possible, resources reallocated to the highest priority areas in the normal way.

Permanent secretaries cannot, of course, take the full range of decisions that would be available to Ministers. In that context, the UK Government shall continue to support the Northern Ireland Administration, and to do whatever is necessary to meet our responsibilities to the people of Northern Ireland.

Annex of tables can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-03-08/HCWS527/.

[HCWS527]

TRANSPORT

Wheelchair Spaces on Buses

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Government believe that where people live, shop, go out, or park their car should not be determined by their disability and recognise the importance of accessible transport networks in supporting disabled people to live independent lives and fulfil their potential.

In January 2017 the Supreme Court handed down its judgment in the case of Paulley v. FirstGroup plc, concerning the “reasonable adjustments” which must be provided by bus operators to enable wheelchair users to access the on-board wheelchair space.

The Supreme Court judgment states that FirstGroup’s policy with regard to use of the wheelchair space was insufficient to meet the requirements of the Equality Act 2010, and that bus drivers should be required to do more than simply request that a person vacates the wheelchair space, including suspending the journey if needed. The judgment did not provide clarity on precisely what action a service provider should require its drivers to take or how the needs of both passengers in wheelchairs and other bus users, disabled or otherwise, should be taken into account.

In order to understand the implications of the judgment for disabled people, the bus industry and other passengers, and to identify actions for Government and others to take to ensure that required adjustments can be provided on buses we established a stakeholder “task and finish group on the use of wheelchair spaces on buses” (the group).
The group’s report to Ministers stated that:

“Our view is that drivers need to play an active role in ensuring that the wheelchair space is made available for passengers in wheelchairs, which includes requiring other passengers to move where necessary, but that drivers also need more powers than they have currently to enable them to do this effectively”.

The group agreed that while wheelchair users should be granted access to the on-board wheelchair space they may not be the only passengers who rely on using it, but that where other passengers do not have such a need they should be expected to vacate the space in order that it can be occupied by a wheelchair user.

The group made four specific recommendations:

That the Public Service Vehicles (Conduct of Drivers, Inspectors, Conductors and Passengers) Regulations 1990 (the Conduct Regulations) are amended to enable drivers to remove passengers from the bus who unreasonably refuse to move when requested from the wheelchair space;

The associated guidance is amended to better reflect the behaviours expected from drivers and passengers with respect to use of the wheelchair space;

Further work is conducted to consider how best to raise public awareness of the behaviours expected from passengers with respect to the wheelchair space, for example a public awareness campaign, or improved signage on buses; and

That conditions of carriage and disability awareness training best practice guidance are updated to reflect the fact that passengers will be required to move from the wheelchair space should it be required by a passenger in a wheelchair.

I am grateful to the group for their careful consideration of this complex issue.

Government agree with the group that the wheelchair space should be available to those who need it and that the balance of measures proposed, supporting bus drivers to facilitate access to the wheelchair space, and creating an environment where the needs of disabled passengers are recognised and respected should help to overcome the barriers still faced by some disabled people when using bus services.

In accepting the group’s recommendations in principle we will begin a process of further engagement to understand the specific experiences of a range of stakeholders affected by the wheelchair space issue, including wheelchair users, parents travelling with young children, and bus drivers—with a view to bringing forward a package of measures in 2018, informed by the group’s recommendations and our further consideration, to support access to the wheelchair space.

Disabled people make 10 times as many journeys by bus as by rail, and it is essential that the services they rely upon to access education, employment, social and leisure activities are accessible to them. We hope that in supporting access to the wheelchair space for those who need it we will help many more disabled people to travel with confidence.

Copies of the task and finish group’s report to Ministers and accompanying letter have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

[HCWS523]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Universal Credit

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): On 8 February 2018, the Work and Pensions Select Committee, published a report into the universal credit project assessment reviews. From this publication, the House will be aware that my Department has been involved in a request under the Freedom of Information Act, for the release of the project assessment reviews conducted between March 2012 and October 2015 on the universal credit programme.

Project assessment reviews are an assurance tool used to assess major projects and programmes. The reviews are conducted by project professionals and subject matter experts drawn from across the public and private sector. The effectiveness of the reviews relies on confidentiality: information within the reports is non-attributable to encourage candour and a frank exchange of views. The reports act as advice to the senior responsible owner on the delivery aspects of their programme—they are not advice to Ministers. They are intended to give the senior responsible owner a project delivery perspective on their programme, independent of the programme management function. They represent perspectives for the senior responsible owner to consider and not absolute truths. The senior responsible owner, not the review team, is accountable to Parliament.

It should be noted that the reviews I will place in the Library are historical, conducted between March 2012 and October 2015. Come 2018, the universal credit programme is in a very different place since those reports were written. Universal credit is in every jobcentre and we are rolling it out safely and securely to all categories of claimant. We are focusing on the continued safe delivery of universal credit, so people continue to be helped to improve their lives.

In recognition of the confidential nature of these reports, the Work and Pensions Select Committee viewed the full set of project assessment reviews up to 2017 and published a report on 8 February 2018. The Work and Pensions Select Committee agrees that the historical issues have now been addressed and “substantial achievements have been delivered since 2013. In the Committee’s report, they commended the Department for running the universal credit programme “more professionally and efficiently with a collective sense of purpose”.

The universal credit programme does not lack scrutiny as the ongoing Work and Pension’s Select Committee inquiries demonstrate. Given the Select Committee has seen the reports subject to the freedom of information challenge, and commented upon them publically I can see no point in continuing to argue that case. Accordingly my officials will be writing to the Information Commissioner and to the first-tier tribunal to advise them of my decision to release copies of the requested project assessment review reports to the requestor.

With regard to future reports, I emphasise that the steps I have decided to take today, to disclose the material subject to proceedings, are exceptional. I remain of the view that it is critical to the effectiveness of the Infrastructure and Projects Authority assurance framework for participants to be confident that their comments will be non-attributable and that review reports will be treated as confidential.
I accept that this House and the wider public have significant interest in major Government projects. I support the principle of transparency, and the universal credit programme regularly publishes independent research and analysis into the effectiveness of universal credit. I believe that there are better ways of addressing this concern, rather than undermining the mechanism that provides senior responsible owners with an independent external perspective on the programmes they are responsible to Parliament for.

Universal credit is a flexible benefit, which has simplified the welfare system and ensures that people are always better off in work. We know that the legacy system trapped people in benefit dependency. We needed a new approach to reflect the 21st-century work environment. The evidence shows universal credit is working, with people getting into work faster and staying in work longer than under the old system.

I am sure this House joins me in recognising the great progress we have made since 2010, with 3 million more people in work and unemployment at a near record low. Universal credit builds on this success, delivering welfare reform that works for everyone.
Written Statements

Monday 12 March 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Competitiveness Council

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): The Competitiveness Council (Internal Market and Industry) will take place on 12 March in Brussels. Day two on research and space has been cancelled.

The Council will hold an exchange of views on the European semester 2018: Digitalisation of the EU economy. The Council will discuss industrial policy and will look to agree upon a set of conclusions on a future EU industrial policy strategy for competitiveness, growth and innovation. There will then be a discussion to mark the 25th anniversary of the single market. Finally, there will be a ‘competitiveness check-up’ discussion which I expect to focus on the externalities of regulation in services on manufacturing.

The Council will discuss a number of AOB points on the Industry 2030 roundtable and the plastic strategy, both presented by the Commission. The Council will end with a point on better regulation presented by the presidency.

[HCWS528]

ECOFIN

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): A meeting of The Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 13 March 2018. EU Finance Ministers will discuss the following:

- Early morning session
  - The Eurogroup President will brief the Council on the outcomes of the 12 March meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU.
  - Mandatory disclosure rules
  - The Council will be invited to reach political agreement on the Council directive regarding the mandatory automatic exchange of information in the field of taxation in relation to reportable cross-border arrangements.
  - Banking package
  - The Council will be invited to agree on a general approach on the legislative proposals included in the Banking package (Capital Requirements Regulation (CRR) and Directive (CRD), Single Resolution Mechanism Regulation (SRMR), and the Bank Recovery and Resolution Directive (BRRD)).
  - Current financial services legislative proposals
  - The Bulgarian presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services and the Commission will present its most recent capital markets union package.

European semester 2018

Following a presentation by the Commission on its 2018 country reports, the Council will hold an exchange of views on the implementation of country-specific recommendations with a focus on productivity growth. The Council will also be requested to adopt the conclusions on the European Court of Auditors special report on the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure (MIP). 

G20 meeting

The Council will be invited to approve the EU terms of reference for the G20 meeting on 19-20 March in Buenos Aires.

Status of the implementation of financial services legislation

The Commission will inform the Council on the status of the implementation of financial services legislation.

[HCWS536]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

UK-Gibraltar Relationship

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I chaired the sixth meeting of the UK-Gibraltar Joint Ministerial Council (Gibraltar EU Negotiations) on Thursday 8 March. We agreed a series of measures that will ensure that the valued and historic links between the UK and Gibraltar grow, deepen and endure.

The UK will guarantee Gibraltar financial services firms’ access to UK markets as now until 2020. Ahead of this, the UK Government will work closely with the Government of Gibraltar to design a replacement framework to endure beyond 2020 similarly based on shared, high standards of regulation, and enforcement of this regulation, and underpinned by modern arrangements for information-sharing, transparency and regulatory co-operation.

The UK and Gibraltar have agreed to recognise the importance of enhancing our liaison on all of the environmental and fisheries implications of EU exit that are relevant to Gibraltar, whether by sharing information as openly as possible, by providing specialist expertise across a range of policy areas to support Gibraltar with its own preparations, or by considering Gibraltar with its own preparations, or by considering Gibraltar where its interests might be promoted in future through regional or international agreements.

The UK has provided assurance to the Government of Gibraltar that, following EU exit, British citizens resident in Gibraltar will continue to be eligible for higher education home fee status at English institutions (both during the implementation period and afterwards) subject to concluding a reciprocal agreement for UK students studying at higher education institutions in Gibraltar.

The UK has provided assurance that gambling operators based in Gibraltar will continue to access the UK market after we leave the EU in the same way they do now—and we are working towards agreement of a MOU which will enable closer working and collaboration between gambling regulators in Gibraltar and the UK.

The UK is committed to work closely with the Government of Gibraltar towards transport arrangements post EU exit that support Gibraltar’s prosperity.
The UK will maintain the current reciprocal healthcare arrangement between the UK and Gibraltar. This means that Gibraltar can continue to refer an unlimited number of their patients to the UK for free elective treatment. The UK remains committed to fully involving Gibraltar as we leave the EU. We will continue to work together through the JMC process to ensure we take account of Gibraltar’s priorities in our negotiations with the EU.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Opposition Day Debate: Refugees and Human Rights

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Her Majesty's Government welcomed the heartfelt and well-informed debate on this highly topical subject on 24 January 2017, and therefore did not oppose the motion.

Human rights are at the very heart of the UK's foreign policy. These rights, as set out in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are interrelated, interdependent and indivisible. These rights apply equally to all humankind. Her Majesty's Government will continue to champion these rights across the globe. This is the right thing to do, legally, ethically and morally. It is also in the nation's interest: full respect for human rights is a key requisite for free, prosperous and secure societies.

The UK supports a co-ordinated and comprehensive approach in meeting the challenges of unmanaged migration, working with our European and other partners. That means addressing the drivers of migration as well as their consequences, targeting the organised immigration crime groups which facilitate movement into Europe, and helping to provide assistance and opportunities for migrants to stay closer to home.

Her Majesty’s Government believe that promoting respect for all and fighting intolerance and justice helps build inclusion and stable communities. In September the Prime Minister announced a new call to action to combat the heinous crime of modern slavery, which has already attracted over 40 endorsements. The Foreign Secretary has put girls’ education at the heart of the diplomatic work of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office: ensuring girls’ full access to 12 years of quality education is key to improving stability, reducing conflict and delivering prosperity. We continue to raise concerns regarding attacks on LGBT rights, freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression.

Her Majesty’s Government continue to encourage robust international action in dealing with the threats posed by climate change. We are committed to ensuring that the Paris agreement on climate change is implemented effectively, and that global momentum on reducing emissions is maintained. It is also vital that all countries unite to adapt to the changes that have already taken place and to build resilience to the impacts of climate change in those countries most threatened. We have consistently encouraged robust international action on climate security. We are leading by example. The UK has committed a further £5.8 billion in climate finance between 2016 and 2021, as part of the collective effort to mobilise $100 billion of climate finance a year from a range of sources.

Her Majesty’s Government are also in the forefront of efforts on conflict resolution. For example, when the Foreign Secretary visited Burma in February 2018 he pressed the Government of Burma to put in place the conditions to allow for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh, with international oversight, and to insist that the Rohingya should be fully involved in the process. In Syria the United Kingdom has allocated £1.3 billion to meet the needs of refugees and host communities in the region, and we have committed to resettle up to 23,000 of the most vulnerable refugees to the UK. We continue to press all parties to the Libyan conflict to find a sustainable political situation. Elsewhere in Africa, we continue to support some of the most long-term refugee populations, in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia and South Sudan.

Her Majesty’s Government will continue to champion the rights of the most vulnerable, working with the international community. Human rights are for all, wherever they may be. The international community has to work together to ensure that these rights are fully respected.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Dental Charges

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): Regulations have been laid before Parliament to uplift dental charges in England from 1 April 2018.

Dental charges remain an important contribution to the overall cost of dental services. They have existed in some shape or form since 1951, and are one of the NHS services that can be charged for under the 2006 Act.

We have taken the decision to uplift dental charges for those who can afford it, through a 5% increase this year.

This means that the dental charge payable for a band 1 course of treatment will rise by £1 in 2018-19, from £20.60 to £21.60. The dental charge for a band 2 course of treatment will increase by £2.80 in 2018-19, from £56.30 to £59.10. The charge for a band 3 course of treatment will increase by £12.20 in 2018-19, from £244.30 to £256.50.

The uplift announced today continues with the aim of finding an appropriate balance between the costs paid by service users and those met by the NHS through the contributions of taxpayers. If this uplift was not implemented resource savings from other parts of the NHS would need to be generated to make up the shortfall.

Those who qualify for free dental treatment will remain entirely exempt from charges. Those under the age of 18, those under the age of 19 and in full-time education, pregnant women or those who have had a
baby in the previous 12 months, and those on qualifying low income benefits will not be impacted by these changes.

Even those not entitled to exemption from dental charges, but who are on low incomes, are eligible to receive full or partial help with dental charges through the NHS Low Income Scheme.

This policy will allow us to continue to protect the most vulnerable through exemptions and the NHS low income scheme. We therefore consider that the proposed uplifts in charges are fair and proportionate and will support NHS front line services.

Details of the revised charges for 2018-19 can be found in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Charge (£)</th>
<th>Dental Charges</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Band 1 course of treatment (this band includes examination, diagnosis (including radiographs), advice on how to prevent future problems, scale and polish if clinically needed, and preventative care (e.g. applications of fluoride varnish or fissure sealant). This band also covers emergency care in a primary care dental practice such as pain relief or a temporary filling)</td>
<td>£21.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band 2 course of treatment (this band covers everything listed in band 1, plus any further treatment such as fillings, root canal work or extractions)</td>
<td>£59.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band 3 course of treatment (this band covers everything in bands 1 and 2, plus course of treatment including crowns, dentures, bridges and other laboratory work)</td>
<td>£256.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Branded Health Service Medicines

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Lord O'Shaughnessy) has made the following statement:

This statement is to update the House that regulations were laid before Parliament on 9 March 2018 to revise the statutory scheme to control the cost of branded health service medicines. The changes will come into force on 1 April 2018, and are estimated to result in £33 million of savings in the first year. I have also published a response to the consultation and impact assessment which can be viewed on the Parliament website.

Last year the Government consulted on reforms to the statutory scheme to better align the way the statutory scheme and voluntary 2014 pharmaceutical price regulation scheme work, and move towards a more level playing field between companies in the two schemes.

Reforming the statutory scheme will also enable the Department to put more effective pricing and enforcement controls in place, while increasing the levels of savings of health service medicines covered by the scheme.

Having considered the responses to the consultation, the Government are making regulations for a statutory scheme requiring manufacturers and suppliers that come within the scope of the scheme’s provisions to pay the Department of Health and Social Care 7.8% of their net sales income received from the supply of health service medicines. A record of the maximum prices that may be charged for the supply of those health service medicines will be published by the Department. The operation of the statutory scheme will be supported by the requirement for manufacturers and suppliers to record and keep information and to provide that information in accordance with the regulations.

Payments received through the scheme will be passed to the NHS in England, with apportionment to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

After consideration, the Government have amended their approach to the classification of companies in the scope of the scheme, to the exemptions from the payments, and have made a number of minor and technical amendments to ensure the new scheme operates as effectively as possible with the minimum administrative burden to companies.

The regulations will apply to the whole of the UK. Medicines pricing is a reserved area with respect to Wales and Scotland and devolved with respect to Northern Ireland. A legislative consent motion (LCM) was sought from the Northern Ireland Assembly during the passage of the Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Act 2017 (“the 2017 Act”). However, the Assembly was dissolved before the motion itself could be passed. With that in mind, the 2017 Act provided for separate commencement in Northern Ireland, on the basis that it was hoped that a restored executive could complete the LCM process before the provisions were commenced. In the light of the ongoing absence of an Executive, however, a point has been reached whereby a decision on whether to commence the provisions cannot be further deferred. The UK Government have therefore decided to proceed with UK-wide implementation. This decision has not been reached lightly. Yet it is clear that not commencing the provision UK-wide would introduce substantial burdens on companies, and further delay would lead to fewer savings being made by health services across the UK. Given those factors, and noting the support the measures commanded from the previous Executive (with a Legislative Consent Motion laid in the Assembly albeit not passed), I assess that now is the right time to move forward with commencement.

I recognise that I made a commitment to the House during passage of the primary legislation that the provisions would not be commenced in Northern Ireland without an LCM in place. However, there has been no Assembly in place to provide an LCM over a period of more than 13 months and, in its absence, there is a clear public interest in seeing these measures proceed, not least because the measures will generate savings of £1.5 million for Northern Ireland in the first year. It is on that basis that I consider we should move forward. When an Executive has been restored I will write to the Northern Ireland Health Minister to confirm that they are content for the commenced 2017 Act to remain in place. I will also continue to consider carefully any further representations from stakeholders in Northern Ireland, while recognising the broad support that these measures have commanded previously.

It is also available online at: http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Policy

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I am today announcing how I am minded to proceed in response to the locally-led proposals that I have received for improving local government in Buckinghamshire. Currently in the administrative County of Buckinghamshire, there is a two-tier structure of Buckinghamshire County Council and the district councils of Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, High Wycombe, and South Bucks.

There is broad local consent for change in Buckinghamshire, though there have been two alternative approaches for how precisely it should be configured. In September 2016 and January 2017, I received locally-led
proposals for replacing the current structure, in one case with a single new unitary council and in the other case with two new unitary councils—one for the area of Aylesbury Vale and the other for the remainder of the current county area.

Having carefully considered all the material and representations I have received, I am minded to implement, subject to parliamentary approval and further discussions, the locally-led proposal to replace the existing five councils across Buckinghamshire with a single council for the area.

I am satisfied that this new single council, if established, is likely to improve local government and service delivery in the county, generating savings, increasing financial resilience, facilitating a more strategic and holistic approach to planning and housing challenges, and sustaining good local services. I am also satisfied that across Buckinghamshire as a whole there is a good deal of local support for this new council, and that the area of the council represents a credible geography.

Whereas, I am equally satisfied that establishing two councils for the current county area is unlikely to improve local government in the area, generate significant savings, or provide the capacity to sustain major services or to address planning and housing challenges. I believe the areas of the two councils would not represent a credible geography or clear local identity, and that there is significantly less local support for two councils than for a single council. Accordingly, I am not minded to proceed with the proposal for establishing two councils.

Notwithstanding, I am clear that in relation to establishing a single council further steps are needed to secure local consent amongst the local partners, and I hope this “minded to” announcement will facilitate the necessary discussions to deliver this local agreement.

Before I take my final decision, there is now a period until 25 May 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 decision would also be subject to parliamentary approval.

[HCWS534]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council


The Council will be invited to conduct a policy debate on The Future of Social Europe Post 2020.

Under an agenda item on the European semester, the Council will be invited to adopt the following documents of the European semester: the Joint Employment Report (JER) and Council conclusions on the Annual Growth Survey (AGS).

The Council will receive a presentation from the Commission on its 2018 country reports on the implementation of country specific recommendations (CSRs) from 2017.

The Council will be invited to endorse the opinion of the Employment Committee (EMCO)’s on the latest biennial assessment of member states’ progress against the non-binding Council recommendation of 2013 on a youth guarantee for tackling youth unemployment.

The Council will be invited to adopt a recommendation for a European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships. The Council will then conduct a policy debate on closing the gender pay gap: contributing to the achievement of the goals of the European social pillar.

Under any other business, the Commission will present information on its awaited social fairness package, the Commission and the President will present information on the tripartite social summit, and the chairs of the EMCO and the Social Protection Committee (SPC) will provide information on their respective 2018 work programmes.

[HCWS529]

TRANSPORT

HS2 Update

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I am pleased to inform the House that we have published our consultation response on taking forward the vision of a Crewe hub.

This response signals how our plans will support that vision and allow for the introduction of an additional HS2 service to Stoke-on-Trent.

To enable this, we will amend our plans for HS2 Phase 2A, from Birmingham to Crewe. This includes 400 metre platforms at Crewe, which allow longer HS2 trains to split and join, opening up opportunities to serve more destinations including Stoke-on-Trent and enabling more people to access high-speed, long-distance services.

We also intend to ask the franchise operator, West Coast Partnership, to include a high-speed service to Stoke-on-Trent in its market development and service plans.

A Crewe hub could generate significant opportunities—not only for Crewe, but also for the surrounding region. To fully realise that vision will need central and local government to work together and require future decisions to be taken as part of Phase 2B.

We welcome the progress being made by Cheshire East Council and the local enterprise partnership in identifying how they could invest in the scheme to ensure the benefits are fully realised.

The steps we are taking today will ensure Crewe and Stoke-on-Trent can benefit fully from HS2 and build on the earlier decision to bring the benefits of HS2 to Crewe from 2027, six years earlier than originally planned.

HS2 will become the new backbone of our national rail network. It will increase capacity on our busy railways and improve connections between our biggest cities and regions. It will support our industrial strategy, generating jobs, skills and economic growth to help build an economy that works for all.

[HCWS535]
Financial Guidance and Claims Bill


[HCWS528]
Written Statements

Tuesday 13 March 2018

TREASURY

Spring Statement

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Making a success of EU exit is a priority for the Government and the Treasury. At the Autumn Budget 2017, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer committed £3 billion over the next two financial years to helping Departments and the devolved Administrations to prepare. Working with colleagues across Government to prioritise the essential programmes to realise the opportunities from EU exit, the Treasury has allocated funding to Departments as follows in 2018-19:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>£ million</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet Office</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition and Markets Authority</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy</td>
<td>185.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs</td>
<td>310.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department for International Trade</td>
<td>74.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department for Transport</td>
<td>75.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Health and Social Care</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Standards Agency</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign and Commonwealth Office</td>
<td>29.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HM Revenue &amp; Customs</td>
<td>260.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HM Treasury</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Office</td>
<td>395.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Defence</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Justice</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland Office</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office for National Statistics</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland Office</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The National Archives</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales Office</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This has generated the following Barnett consequentials for the devolved Administrations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>£ million</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland Executive</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Government</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welsh Government</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Government are committed to seeking a new future economic partnership with the European Union and this funding will help us to prepare for all eventualities. As the negotiations continue, we will need to reflect upon any progress and consider requirements accordingly. I will work with my colleagues across Government to ensure these allocations achieve value for money for the taxpayer. Final allocations will be made at the 2018-19 Supplementary Estimates in early 2019.

[HCWS540]
In the coming months the Government will publish:

**Improving business productivity**—BEIS will publish a call for evidence to understand how best we can help the UK’s least productive businesses to learn from, and catch-up with, the most productive.

**Delivering a fair payment culture for small businesses**—BEIS will launch a call for evidence on how to eliminate unfair payment practices to small businesses.

**Prompt payment by Government suppliers**—the Cabinet Office will launch a consultation on making a supplier’s approach to payments to its own suppliers part of the selection process for larger government contracts.

**Transferable Tax History (TTH) for oil and gas**—a consultation on draft legislation to introduce a transferable tax history for oil and gas companies, to encourage new investment in UK oil and gas fields.

**Petroleum Revenue Tax (PRT) deduction for decommissioning costs**—a consultation on draft legislation to allow a petroleum revenue tax deduction for decommissioning costs incurred by a previous licence holder, to encourage investment in UK oil and gas fields.

**Green growth**

The tax system can be a lever to encourage people and businesses to make healthier, more environmentally responsible choices. The Government are committed to improving air quality in the UK’s towns and cities, and protecting the environment for future generations.

Today the Government will publish:

**Single-use plastics waste**—a call for evidence seeking views on how the tax system or charges could reduce the amount of single-use plastics waste, to protect the environment. This will look at the whole supply chain for single-use plastics, including alternative materials, reusable options and recycling opportunities, to consider how the tax system and charges can help drive technological progress and behavioural change.

In the coming months the Government will publish:

**Red diesel use in non-agricultural, non-road mobile machinery**—a call for evidence into whether the use of red diesel tax relief discourages the purchase of cleaner engines. The primary focus of this call for evidence will be on improving air quality outcomes, particularly in urban areas. Red diesel for agricultural use will be outside the scope of the call for evidence, as will home heating use and other static generators.

**Reforming VED rates for vans**—a consultation on reducing VED rates for the cleanest vans through creating a graduated system requiring capital gains tax due on a disposal of residential property to be paid within 30 days of completion.

**VAT and vouchers**—a response to a consultation on changes to the VAT treatment of vouchers. This change will amend VAT law to ensure that when customers pay with vouchers, businesses account for the same amount of VAT as when other means of payment are used.

**Taxation of trusts**—a consultation on how to make the taxation of trusts simpler, fairer and more transparent.

**Large business compliance**—a response to the consultation into HMRC’s process for risk-profile large businesses, to improve HMRC’s Business Risk Review process, reflecting and further enhancing the shift in large business compliance behaviours.

WEB-EXTRACT-PROTECTED

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

**Foreign Affairs Council**

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Minister for Asia and the Pacific, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 26 February. The Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

**FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL**

**Current Affairs**

Ministers called for urgent implementation of UN Security Council resolution 2401 of 24 February which demanded a cessation of hostilities in Syria to enable delivery of humanitarian assistance. They agreed that the High Representative would send a letter to the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Turkey and Iran—the three guarantors of the Astana Process—to ask them to work on implementation of the resolution.

**Moldova**

Ministers discussed the Republic of Moldova and adopted conclusions. Ministers reiterated the EU’s commitment to strengthening bilateral relations while...
underlining the need to continue adopting and implementing key reforms for the benefit of Moldovan citizens.

**Venezuela**

Ministers exchanged views on the political stalemate in the country following the suspension of the Santo Domingo talks between the Government and the opposition and the announcement of presidential elections scheduled for 22 April.

Ministers expressed their solidarity with Spain, following the decision by the Venezuelan authorities to declare the ambassador of Spain in Caracas persona non grata and agreed to continue closely monitoring the situation and to keep channels of communication open, both with the opposition and with the Government.

**Middle east peace process**

Ministers discussed recent developments in the middle east peace process in preparation for the lunch with representatives of the League of Arab States.

**Informal lunch**

Over lunch with the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States (LAS) and members of the LAS ministerial delegation on Jerusalem, Ministers discussed options for reviving the middle east peace process in an inclusive manner, with the objective of achieving a two-state solution and Jerusalem as the future capital of both states. Ministers also discussed the importance of increasing collective, international support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Ministers agreed a number of measures without discussion:

- The Council adopted conclusions on Burma;
- The Council adopted conclusions on Cambodia;
- The Council adopted conclusions on the Maldives;
- The Council adopted conclusions on climate diplomacy;
- The Council adopted conclusions on EU priorities at United Nations human rights fora in 2018;
- The Council adopted conclusions on human trafficking in south/south-east Asia;
- The Council increased the restrictive measures against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea;
- The Council added the Minister of Industry and the Minister of Information of the Government of Syria to the list of those targeted by EU restrictive measures;
- The Council adopted legal texts imposing restrictive measures on one person for his activities in support of Daesh;
- The Council adopted the common military list of the EU;
- The Council adopted a decision on the continuation of EU funding for the activities of the European network of independent non-proliferation and disarmament think tanks;
- The Council approved an extension for the implementation of EU strategy against proliferation of weapons of mass destruction;
- The Council adopted a decision on continuing to provide assistance to the provisional technical secretariat of the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty organisation;
- The Council agreed the annotated agenda for the first meeting of the EU-Cuba Joint Council;
- The Council decided not to oppose the adoption of five Commission food regulations (Health)

[HCWS539]
**HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE**

**Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards and Mental Capacity**

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Subject to the written ministerial statement HCWS202 made on 30 October 2017, I am today announcing the publication of the Government’s final response to the Law Commission’s report on mental capacity and deprivation of liberty safeguards (DoLS), a copy of which is attached.

I welcome the publication of the Law Commission’s report and thank them for their careful, comprehensive and considered work. This Government are committed to take action to reform mental health, and transform care for people with learning difficulties and/or autism. Taking action to reform the current DoLS regime is an important contribution towards achieving these aims and providing greater protection for some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

We have set out in detail our provisional view of each individual proposal in our response, and we broadly agree with the liberty protection safeguards model. As the Government have commissioned a review into the Mental Health Act, proposals that relate to the interface between the Mental Health Act and Mental Capacity Act will be considered as part of that review. We also want to ensure that liberty protection safeguards fit with the conditions and future direction of the health and social care sector, so we will continue to work through the detail of the recommendations and engage further with stakeholders particularly on implementation. We will bring forward legislation to implement the model when parliamentary time allows.

**HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

**Communities Policy Update**

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The Government’s manifesto said they would bring forward a new integration strategy to help people in more isolated communities to engage with the wider world, help women in particular into the workplace, and teach more people to learn English.

The “Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper”, published today, sets out the Government’s ambitious proposals to build strong, integrated communities where people—whatever their background—live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities.

This strategy is for England and the majority of the policy proposals set out in this Green Paper are in areas where responsibility is devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There are some proposals on the immigration system, which are reserved matters.

The consultation will run from 14 March until 5 June 2018.

Copies of the Green Paper will be placed in the Library of the House and are available on the Government’s website:


An oral statement will be delivered to both Houses later today.
Written Statements

Thursday 15 March 2018

DEFENCE

Baseline Profit Rate 2018-19

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I am today announcing that I have set the baseline profit rate for single source defence contracts at 6.81%, in line with the rate recommended by the Single Source Regulations Office (SSRO). I have also accepted the methodology used by the SSRO to calculate this figure.

I am also announcing new capital servicing rates and an SSRO funding adjustment as recommended by the SSRO, which can be found at table 1 below. These rates have also been published in the London Gazette, as required by the Defence Reform Act 2014.

All of these new rates will come into effect from 1 April 2018.

Table 1: Recommended Rates agreed by the Secretary of State for Defence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>2017 rates</th>
<th>2018 rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baseline Profit Rate (BPR) (% on contract cost)</td>
<td>7.46%</td>
<td>6.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixed Capital Servicing Rate (% on Fixed Capital employed)</td>
<td>4.84%</td>
<td>4.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Capital Servicing Rate (% on positive Working Capital employed)</td>
<td>1.37%</td>
<td>1.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Capital Servicing Rate (% on negative Working Capital employed)</td>
<td>0.59%</td>
<td>0.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSRO Funding Adjustment</td>
<td>-0.025%</td>
<td>-0.024%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[HCWS554]

EDUCATION

School Condition Allowance

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): My hon. friend the Under-Secretary of State for the School System (Lord Agnew) has made the following written ministerial statement:

Today, I am announcing the allocation of £1.4 billion in 2018-19 to maintain and improve the condition of the education estate. Investing in our school buildings is a key part of the Government’s plan to ensure that every child has the opportunity of a place at a good school, whatever their background.

For the financial year 2018-19, the £1.4 billion of funding includes approximately: £0.7 billion for local authorities, voluntary aided partnerships, larger multi-academy trusts and academy sponsors, to invest in their own condition priorities.

£0.5 billion for academies and sixth-form colleges through the condition improvement fund—the outcomes of bids to this fund will be announced later this year.

£0.2 billion of devolved formula capital to be allocated directly to schools later in 2018.

To provide stability for schools while we review the approach to capital funding for 2019-20, we have continued the existing capital funding approach for the financial year 2018-19.

In addition, £100 million of revenue generated from the soft drinks industry levy will be provided in 2018-19 for the healthy pupils capital fund. This fund is intended to improve children’s and young people’s physical and mental health—for example, by improving playgrounds and sports facilities, or kitchens, dining or medical facilities. The healthy pupils capital fund is being allocated alongside 2018-19 school condition funding.

Details of today’s announcement will be published on the gov.uk website, and copies will be placed in the Library of the House.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Hong Kong: Sino-British Joint Declaration

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The latest six-monthly report on the implementation of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong was published today, and can be found as an on line attachment. It covers the period from 1 July to 31 December 2017. The report has been placed in the Library of the House. A copy is also available on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website: www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-office. I commend the report to the House.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-03-15/HCWS544/.

[HCWS554]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Commission for Countering Extremism

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I am today confirming Ms Sara Khan’s appointment to the role of lead commissioner of the Government’s new Commission for Countering Extremism.

All necessary pre-employment checks have been completed.

Ms Khan’s appointment follows a rigorous and transparent competition carried out in accordance with the Cabinet Office’s governance code on public appointments. I am delighted that Ms Khan will drive forward the vital work of the Commission for Countering Extremism. Ms Khan’s extensive experience in countering extremism and defending the rights of women and girls, and her determination to confront and challenge extremism wherever it resides makes her ideally suited to this role.

Extremism causes a wide range of harms, including the promotion of hatred and division, discrimination against women and girls, the encouragement of isolation, and the rejection of our democratic system and the rule of law. The Commission for Countering Extremism will have a clear remit to identify extremism in all its forms, whether online or in our communities.

As we consider new approaches to tackling extremism, I believe that there is much that can be learnt from how society sought to tackle racism in the last century. In particular how the state and civil society worked together to take on and challenge a set of attitudes and beliefs that have no place in this country.

I have agreed with Ms Khan that her early priorities will include:
Engaging widely and openly on extremism and Britain’s values across the public sector, communities, civil society, and with legal and academic experts.

Producing a strategic assessment of the threat we face from extremism, and the current response.

Advising Ministers on the Commission’s future structures, work programme and the appointment of further commissioners. This advice will in part be informed by the lead commissioner’s engagement with stakeholders.

The Commission will also produce an annual report on its work.

Alongside this statement, I have today published a charter for the Commission, which sets out its relationship with the Government and the public. The Commission for Countering Extremism will initially be established as a non-statutory expert committee of the Home Office. It will operate independently, at arm’s length from Government.

The Commission will play a crucial role in supporting the Government and their partners to tackle the scourge of extremism and stand up for the shared values of the mainstream majority. I look forward to working with Ms Khan on this shared agenda.

Justice and Home Affairs: Post-Council Statement

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The EU Justice and Home Affairs Council of Ministers met on 8 and 9 March in Brussels. I represented the UK for Interior day.

Interior day (8 March) began with a discussion on co-operation between common security and defence policy operations and EU JHA agencies. Ministers endorsed an initiative to more effectively co-ordinate the activity and improve the exchange of information between JHA agencies and EU security and defence missions in third countries.

This was followed by an exchange of views on the implementation of the directive on the use of passenger name record (PNR) data. Member states provided updates on progress of their implementation. I intervened to reiterate the UK’s existing capability for processing PNR data, and offered to share expertise with other member states.

Ministers then discussed co-operation with the western Balkans on security and counter-terrorism, with reference to the European Commission’s western Balkans strategy, which was published in February. The Government is supportive of the EU’s efforts to building stronger co-operation in this region. The Government are committed to working closely with European partners on this issue and will be hosting the western Balkans summit 2018 in July, at which security will form a strong element.

Over lunch, Ministers discussed progress made on combating the threat posed by terrorist use of the internet, including engagement with industry and the work of the EU internet forum. The Government remain committed to preventing terrorist use of the internet and are supportive of both the EU internet forum and the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism in tackling this issue. I conveyed the Government’s development, announced by the Home Office in February, of new technology to automatically detect terrorist content on any online platform and offered to share the tool with European partners.

In the afternoon, there was a discussion on the increasing role of JHA agencies in counter-terrorism with a focus on the potential future strategic direction of these agencies. The Government welcome the growing role of JHA agencies in helping member states counter terrorism and recognise the need to maximise the effectiveness of existing systems. I reiterated the UK’s commitment to appropriate data sharing with Europol and supported improved co-operation between JHA agencies and third countries, as long as human rights and data protection safeguards are in place.

Ministers then discussed the proposed regulation on establishing a framework for inter-operability between EU information systems for enhancing external border management and internal security. Member states agreed to aim for conclusion of Council negotiations by the end of June to allow agreement with the European Parliament by the end of 2018. I intervened to underline the importance of all EU member states and Schengen states having access to information from all EU databases under this system.

On migration, member states generally agreed with the presidency’s priorities on the way forward, including strengthening the external border, improving returns and co-operation with third countries. I announced that the UK will be resettling up to 100 of the most vulnerable refugees evacuated from Libya, and that the UK has also now resettled over 10,000 vulnerable refugees affected by the Syrian crisis since 2014. I also announced that the Government have renewed our offer to continue specialist deployments to Greece.

Justice day (9 March) began with a discussion on the recast of the Brussels IIa regulation, which focussed on how to best ensure adequate resourcing of central authorities, which play a key role in judicial co-operation on matters of parental responsibility. The presidency concluded, in line with the position taken by the UK and a majority of member states that adequate resourcing for central authorities was important, but that the level of resourcing should be left to the member states.

A general approach was reached on the proposed directive on combating fraud and counterfeiting of non-cash means of payment. The UK has not opted in to this directive.

There was an update on the preparatory steps needed to be taken to ensure that the European public prosecutor’s office (EPPO) becomes operational in 2020. The UK is clear that it will not participate in the EPPO.

There was also a policy debate on work to improve law enforcement access to cross-border e-evidence. The Commission will publish a legislative proposal in April. The discussion focused on ensuring that EU and US law is complementary and member states supported the exploration of an EU-US agreement on e-evidence. The UK intervened to recognise the importance of addressing the obstacles to obtaining e-evidence.

Over lunch, representatives from member states discussed radicalisation in prisons, agreeing on the importance of continuing to share experience and best practice.

[HCWS547]
The Commission also presented recommendations concerning illegal content on online platforms that were published on 1 March and highlighted the link with the code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online.

[HCWS548]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): On 9 January, I announced to the House the appointment of Max Caller CBE as inspector to conduct an independent inspection of Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) to better understand the NCC’s compliance with its best value duty.

The inspector has today sent me his report which he has also copied to the council. I am placing a copy of that report in the Libraries of both Houses and a copy can be found online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/northamptonshire-county-council-best-value-inspection.

The report contains challenging findings:

The inspector has identified that the council has failed to properly comply with its best value duty for some time. This is not because of lack of funds: as the report states, the council’s “Mind the Gap” analysis “does not demonstrate that NCC has been particularly badly treated by the funding formula”.

The report sets out in some detail the governance failings which have culminated in the council’s chief finance officer issuing a section 114 notice to stop new spending and KPMG’s advisory notice on the council’s budget. It concludes “living within budget constraints is not part of the culture of NCC”.

These findings appear very serious indeed both for the council and its residents. The inspector has made recommendations for how improvement can be secured. He rules out the option of an internally led strategy and suggests that commissioners should be appointed in the short term to ensure the proper running of the council and delivery of services for its taxpayers, while proposals for restructuring are developed as a longer term solution.

I am grateful to the inspector and his team for the thoroughness of their work and the clarity of their conclusions. I will now consider in detail their report’s findings and proposals for the future. I will make another statement to the House setting out my proposals for next steps, including whether or not to exercise my powers of intervention under section 15 of the 1999 Act, in due course.

[HCWS549]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment and Support Allowance

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): On 14 December 2017 my predecessor provided a statement to the House on how the Department will be undertaking work to correct underpayments that may have occurred as a result of how a proportion of incapacity benefit claims were transitioned to employment and support allowance between 2011 and 2014. I wanted to take this opportunity to update the House on how this work is progressing.

My Department will be reviewing close to 300,000 cases, of which just under a quarter have been underpaid. We have begun contacting individuals and making payments. We are actively recruiting staff and have scaled up the team undertaking the work from 10 to 50 in December last year, which will grow further to 400 from April, allowing us to deal with the situation at pace.

I know many Members will want to provide reassurance to their constituents who think they may have been affected. I can assure the House that my Department will be contacting all those identified as potentially impacted. We have been engaging with external organisations that often provide support and advice to our claimants, so that they too can be confident that we have a robust process in place, and can provide individual advice should they be contacted.

Today I can confirm that, based on departmental analysis, we will be prioritising any individuals whom we know from our systems to be terminally ill. Thereafter we will work through the cases identified as most likely to have been underpaid according to our systems. We have also undertaken an equality analysis to support this prioritisation approach.

Once an individual is contacted, and the relevant information gathered, they can expect to receive appropriate payment within 12 weeks. I can also confirm that once contacted, individuals will be provided with a dedicated free phone number on which they can make contact with the Department.

Like my predecessor, I am committed to ensuring that all cases are reviewed and paid by April 2019.
Written Statements

Friday 16 March 2018

TREASURY

European Union Finances

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):
I have today laid before Parliament the European Union Finances 2017: statement on the 2017 EU Budget and measures to counter fraud and financial mismanagement (Cm 9576).

This is a routine annual publication. It is the 37th in the series.

The statement gives details of revenue and expenditure in the 2017 European Union Budget, recent developments in EU financial management and measures to counter fraud against the EU Budget. It also includes a chapter and annex updating on the use of EU funds in the UK over the period.

[HCWS556]

EDUCATION

Educational Outcomes

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds):
This Government are committed to ensuring that every child—regardless of their circumstances—can benefit from their education, ensuring they have the knowledge and skills to fulfil their potential, and the resilience they need for future success.

Since 2010, thanks to Government reforms and the hard work of teachers, we have made significant progress in raising standards in the education system. There are now 1.9 million more pupils in good or outstanding schools compared to 2010 and last year 154,000 more six-year-olds were on track to be fluent readers than in 2012.

Today, I am announcing a programme of work to improve our understanding of the educational experiences and outcomes of all children with additional needs, and those who live in challenging circumstances.

These children perform less well at school on average, are at greater risk of being excluded and are overrepresented in alternative provision. This is an overlapping cohort whose needs are often complex—many have special educational needs and disabilities, or are children in need of help and protection and so are supported through the social care system. This work is about understanding what works for these children and spreading effective practice to ensure they can fulfil their potential.

This programme of work includes:

An external review of school exclusions, led by former Children’s Minister Edward Timpson CBE. It will help us to understand how and why schools use exclusion, what drives the variation in exclusion rates and, particularly, the disproportionate exclusion rates of some groups—including black Caribbean boys, children in need, looked after children, and those with special educational needs;

Taking forward reforms to Alternative Provision (AP). AP educates children who are unable to attend mainstream or special schools, for example due to illness or exclusion.

Today the Government are publishing “Creating Opportunity for AH: Our Vision for Alternative Provision”; it outlines our plan to ensure consistently high quality education is provided to all children in AP, across the country, and determine a clear role for AP as an integral part of the education system. This package includes a £4 million innovation fund to develop effective practice;

Reviewing the outcomes of and support for children in need, as set out in our manifesto. We are already reforming children’s social care to improve children’s safety and stability, but our ambition must be for children in need to achieve their full potential. New data published today sets out the challenges they face, and their outcomes through school. The review will develop evidence to understand what works to improve these children’s educational outcomes in practice. This starts today with launching a call for evidence.

I will respond fully to the recommendations of Dame Christine Lenehan’s review of residential special schools, “Good Intentions, Good Enough?”, later this year. I will take that opportunity to set out how the Government will continue working to achieve the vision of a reformed special educational needs and disabilities system, underpinned by the Children and Families Act 2014.

We will focus on what is effective—using evidence to implement successful policy, and to spread best practice. These measures should help to ensure that all children and young people benefit from their education, transforming their experiences and outcomes.

“Creating Opportunity for All: Our Vision for Alternative Provision” and terms of reference for the exclusions review will be placed in the House libraries, and published on the Department for Education’s website. The website will also contain links to supporting documents for both the exclusions and children in need reviews.

[HCWS555]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The Agriculture and Fisheries Council will take place on 19 March in Brussels.

As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus for fisheries will be an exchange of views regarding a regulation on a multi-annual plan for demersal species in the western Mediterranean sea.

The primary focus for agriculture will be the adoption of Council conclusions on “The Future Of Food And Farming”:

There are currently two items scheduled under any other business:

working conditions and safety on board fishing vessels—ratification and transposition of international instruments. joint declaration of 10 Member States (Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain) on future development of freshwater aquaculture in the EU after 2020.

Parliament voted to trigger article 50 and leave the European Union. Until we leave the EU, all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. The outcome of our negotiations with the EU on a future partnership will determine what arrangements apply in future.

[HCWS552]
Environment Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):
I attended the EU Environment Council in Brussels on 5 March. Hannah Blythyn AM, Welsh Minister for Environment, also attended.

I wish to update the House on the matters discussed.

Communications on delivering on the circular economy action plan—exchange of views:

European strategy for plastics in a circular economy;
monitoring framework for the circular economy;
implementation of the circular economy package: options to address the interface between chemical, product and waste legislation.

Ministers exchanged views on the presidency’s questions regarding the plastics strategy and the interface between chemicals, product and waste legislation. The UK referenced the industrial strategy, clean growth strategy and the 25-year environment plan, highlighting UK actions including eliminating all avoidable plastic waste by the end of 2042 in England; a deposit return scheme for drinks containers in Scotland and a reduction of around 80% of single-use carrier bags in Wales since a charge was introduced. Several member states called for the reopening of the packing and packaging waste directive, others highlighted the role of eco-design for plastics and the role of taxation on plastics.

On the EU’s proposed monitoring framework, the UK welcomed the recommendations but called for greater emphasis on the development of indicators earlier in the waste hierarchy to help design out waste. Some member states regretted the lack of concrete measures to address chemicals in the plastics strategy and wanted further references to a non-toxic environment. Others wanted to improve the traceability of chemicals in plastics.

The presidency stated it plans to adopt Council conclusions on the European strategy for plastics, and on the interface between chemical, product and waste legislation at the June Environment Council in Luxembourg.

Greening the European Semester—exchange of views

The Commission noted that there has been increased focus on greening the European Semester, with the Environmental Implementation Review (EIR) providing better information in this regard. Ministers also responded to presidency questions on compliance and sustainable finance. Several member states thought there was a role for the new multi-annual financial framework in supporting a transition to a sustainable, low carbon economy. The Commission noted the need for actions to be integrated strategically.

AOB items

The following items were also discussed under any other business.

21st European forum on eco-innovation for air quality (Sofia, 5-6 February 2018)

The Commission noted that urgent action needed to be taken at national and EU level to tackle air quality. They stated that a co-ordinated approach together with strong regulation and enforcement were required to succeed.

Global Pact for the Environment

The Council took note of the AOB on the global pact for the environment from the French, supported by Luxembourg. Many delegations supported its aims, and the Commission stated it would propose a draft negotiating mandate for the areas within its competence.

Amsterdam declarations—combating imported deforestation

Delegations took note of the joint AOB from France, Denmark, Netherlands, Germany and the UK on eliminating deforestation from supply chains. The UK intervened to support the declaration and to encourage other member States to join this initiative.

Implementation of the regulation on invasive alien species

The Danish delegation, supported by the Lithuanian and Greek delegations, provided information on the implementation of the EU regulation on invasive alien species.

Review of the regulation on Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH)

The Commission provided information on the review on Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH).

Current legislative proposal (public deliberation in accordance with Article 16(8) of the Treaty on European Union) regulation on CO2 standards for cars and vans

The Commission introduced its proposal for a regulation on emissions standards in cars and vans, with the intention of reaching a general approach at the October Environment Council. The presidency confirmed it will table a policy debate for the June Environment Council.

Developments regarding shipping and the International Maritime Organisation (IMO)

The Commission provided an update on progress ahead of the April IMO meeting in London.

24th session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations framework convention on climate change (COP 24, Katowice, 3-14 December 2018)

Poland introduced an AOB on the 24th Session of the Conference of the Parties (COP24). They noted the importance of adopting the implementing rules underpinning the Paris Agreement and acknowledged the Talanoa dialogue as a fundamental step towards achieving the Paris temperature goals. Many delegations, including the UK, agreed on these two priorities with several member states calling for the publication of a Commission communication on the EU’s long-term strategy in early 2019.

Commercial trade in raw ivory within the EU

The UK introduced a joint AOB with France calling for a ban on the intra-EU trade in raw ivory. This received support from Germany and Luxembourg. The Commission noted it will release a progress report on the EU action plan against wildlife trafficking in July, detailing its next steps.

Parliament voted to trigger Article 50 and leave the European Union. Until we leave the EU, all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. The outcome of our negotiations with the EU on a future partnership will determine what arrangements apply in future.
The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 19 March. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Brussels.

Prior to the FAC there will be an informal meeting, over breakfast, with the Ukrainian Foreign Minister. The Foreign Secretary will brief EU Ministers on developments in our response to the incident in Salisbury. The FAC will then discuss Ukraine, Syria and Iran. There will also be a lunch with the Foreign Minister of the Republic of Korea to discuss recent events.

Foreign Affairs Council
Ukraine

Ministers will have a substantive discussion on Ukraine. This will address the twin strategic challenges facing Ukraine: its crucial reform agenda and ongoing Russian aggression, including in Crimea. The UK remains fully engaged in Ukraine, and will focus on continuing our support to Ukraine in tackling these fundamental challenges.

Syria

Ministers will be joined by UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura to discuss Syria, including implementation of UN Security Council resolution 2401 and support for the UN-led Geneva talks. Ministers will also discuss preparations for the second Brussels conference, which will take place on 24-25 April and will focus on humanitarian support and bolstering the UN-led political process in Geneva.

Iran

Ministers will discuss shared concerns around Iran’s destabilising regional activity and the EU’s role in responding to this.

[HCWS553]
In 2015, Glasgow had 16 jobcentres—more per 100,000 of the population than any other similar sized city in the UK. These jobcentres were on average around 40% utilised. The jobcentres had built up historically within the four quarters of Glasgow, primarily within large housing estates. As a result, Glasgow had more smaller sites and as unemployment has dropped across the city, so has the use of some of these smaller jobcentres. These small, half-empty offices make it challenging to create a welcoming and positive environment. We proposed to bring these smaller jobcentres together into larger existing sites within the city's four quarters. The larger sites are all geographically based in locations around the city that can offer better services to our customers.

An announcement made on Wednesday 7 December 2016 confirmed that eight of the 16 Glasgow jobcentres were proposed for closure. A detailed equality analysis was completed for each of these sites and the findings were used to understand the potential impact on both the people using our services and DWP employees. In addition, DWP carried out three public consultations, through which it gathered knowledge about each local area, including potential new journey times and costs for claimants.

DWP considered this additional information and changed its original proposal. In July 2017, we confirmed that two of the eight jobcentres originally proposed for closure would be retained (Castlemilk and Cambuslang) and that six Glasgow jobcentres would close and merge with larger nearby jobcentres. Four of the six mergers have already taken place—Anniesland, Maryhill, Langside and Bridgeton jobcentres. Easterhouse and Parkhead are due to merge with Shettleston jobcentre in February 2018. Even with the reduction to 10 jobcentres, Glasgow will still have the second highest number of jobcentres per head of population than other cities of a similar size.

Our Work Coaches personalise the support they provide for each claimant, taking account of individual need and circumstance, including capability, disability and caring responsibilities, when arranging any attendance. DWP has various ways of interacting with vulnerable claimants, including face-to-face, email, telephone, post and SMS.

Our Work Coaches recognise that following each merger, some claimants will be taking an unfamiliar journey. They will support them throughout the transition to their new jobcentre and we do not expect the changes to result in additional sanctions.

We have undertaken one-to-one conversations with all staff who have been impacted by these changes. In addition to gathering information about individual needs, such as caring responsibilities, those conversations also provided an important opportunity to discuss potential changes to each individual's journey to work and allowed the opportunity to explore the scope to move to new locations.

Information gathered from those conversations was recorded and considered in each site equality analysis before the decision to close a jobcentre was confirmed. All DWP staff affected by jobcentre closures in Glasgow have been, or will be, redeployed to another jobcentre. DWP has consulted and worked closely with departmental trade union sides throughout this process.

As with all major changes delivered by DWP, we are implementing reorganisation of our estate in a staged and controlled way. We are taking this approach because
there are a significant number of activities that need to take place to move our people, our claimants and the associated caseloads to the new jobcentre. In phasing work in this way, we can minimise the risk of any disruption to vital services.

The confirmed office moves and mergers are arranged as part of a much bigger, complex sequence of changes involving a number of suppliers and contractors. To halt the reorganisation of our estate in Glasgow now would be detrimental to claimants, taxpayers and the services we deliver.
Petition

Wednesday 14 March 2018

PRESENTED PETITION
Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

School budgets

The petition of residents of Keighley and Ilkley,
Declares that the cuts in spending to school budgets
in Craven Ward, in the constituency of Keighley and Ilkley,
will lead to further staff redundancies, increasing class
sizes, reductions in the range of subjects on offer and a
decline in educational standards.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of
Commons urges the Government to reverse the cuts
that have been made to school budgets in Craven,
further to protect per pupil funding in real terms in the
schools of Craven over the lifetime of this Parliament,
and further to ensure no school loses out in real terms
as a result of any new funding formula.

And the petitioners remain etc.—[Presented by John
Grogan.]
Ministerial Correction

Monday 5 March 2018

EDUCATION

Primary Schools: Academies

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Education on 29 January 2018.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): All the focus on structures is taking us away from the real issue, which is that this weekend even Tory party donors and academy chain heads were talking about real-terms cuts to funding. That is what I am seeing in the schools in my constituency. Will the Government face up to the real crisis, which is the real-terms cut in school funding?

Damian Hinds: There is more money going into our schools in this country than ever before. We know that real-terms funding per pupil is increasing across the system, and with the national funding formula, each school will see at least a small cash increase. [Official Report, 29 January 2018, Vol. 635, c. 536.]

Letter of correction from Damian Hinds:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) in Education Questions on 29 January 2018.

The correct response should have been:

Damian Hinds: There is more money going into our schools in this country than ever before. We know that overall real-terms funding per pupil is being maintained between 2017-18 and 2019-20, and with the national funding formula, each school will see at least a small cash increase.
Ministerial Corrections

Monday 12 March 2018

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

UK Relations: Saudi Arabia

The following are extracts from an urgent question to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on 7 March 2018.

Sir Vince Cable: Will the Foreign Secretary insist on the ending of the blockade of ports in Yemen, which is contributing to the devastating humanitarian crisis and famine, of which we have heard much in this House?

Alistair Burt: The right hon. Gentleman referred to a blockade. There is no blockade; there are now no restrictions on the ports—the ports are open. There was a restriction from 19 December, following a missile attack on the capital of Yemen by Houthi forces. There is a strong suspicion that weapons were being smuggled into the country. That is why the restrictions were in place. Since 20 December, a total of 50 ships have docked, and the ports are open. [Official Report, 7 March 2018, Vol. 637, c. 314.]

Letter of correction from Alistair Burt:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) in the urgent question on 7 March 2018. The correct response should have been:

Alistair Burt: The right hon. Gentleman referred to a blockade. There is no blockade; the restrictions on the ports have been eased—the ports are open. There was a restriction from 6 November, following a missile attack on the capital of Saudi Arabia by Houthi forces. There is a strong suspicion that weapons were being smuggled into the country. That is why the restrictions were in place. Since 20 December, a total of 50 ships have docked, and the ports are open.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): In the last month there has been huge disruption in access for international aid into Yemen’s ports on the Red sea. Given that that is primarily caused by Saudi Arabian blockades, will the Minister ensure that it is brought up with the Crown Prince as a matter of urgency, and that it is a serious objective of the UK Government to reopen those ports and allow access for humanitarian aid to the 22 million people in need of urgent assistance?

Alistair Burt: I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that I gave the House a moment ago. The restrictions were imposed because of the Saudis’ quite legitimate concerns that weapons, or weapons parts, that are directed against them are smuggled into Yemen. We wanted to give the assurance that we would do all we could to try to prevent that, and that in the process the restrictions on ships coming in could be eased. We have seen an easing of those restrictions. The ports are now open. Fifty ships have docked since the restrictions were eased in December, and we shall do all we can.[Official Report, 7 March 2018, Vol. 637, c. 323.]

Letter of correction from Alistair Burt:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) in the urgent question on 7 March 2018. The correct response should have been:

Alistair Burt: I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that I gave the House a moment ago. The restrictions were imposed because of the Saudis’ quite legitimate concerns that weapons, or weapons parts, that are directed against them are smuggled into Yemen. We wanted to give the assurance that we would do all we could to try to prevent that, and that in the process the restrictions on ships coming in could be eased. We have seen an easing of those restrictions. The ports are now open. Fifty ships have docked since the restrictions were eased in December, and we shall do all we can.